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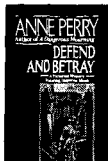
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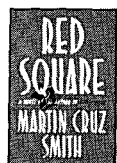
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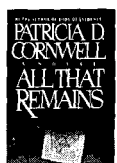
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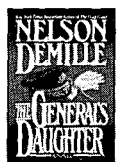
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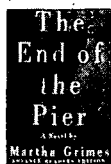
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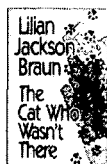
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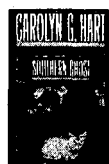
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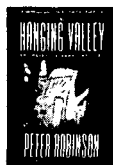
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CONTENTS

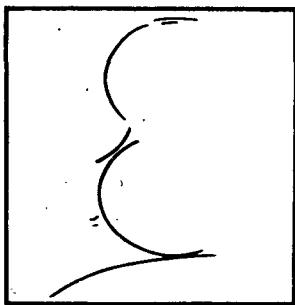


SHORT STORIES

FIAT DE LUXE	by Robert Halsted	6
FATE IS A FOUR LETTER WORD	by Terry Courtney	30
IN THE PINK	by Linda Evans	46
HUNTER AND THE SANIBEL TRADE	by D. L. Richardson	56
ONLY NIGHTS	by Dan Crawford	85
THE RED PICKUP	by Ray Davidson	100
THE PHOTOGRAPHIC MIRACLE	by Ashley Curtis	120
THE FIND AT FENHAM BOG	by V. Pastor	150
DANGER, INC.	by D. H. Reddall	162
THE GENERAL'S TASK FORCE	by Pearl G. Aldrich	177
KING JOSÉ'S HOBBY	by Linda Paul (A Poem)	210
LADY OF THE SNOW	by Martin Limón	213
ILLUSIONS	by James McKimmey	230
EAST END CAFE	by Jas. R. Petrin	244
DÉJÀ VU	by Stephanie Kay Bendel	269

DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES	4
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	99
UNSOLVED by Stew Thornley	160
SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED"	176
BOOKED & PRINTED by Mary Cannon	278
MURDER BY DIRECTION by William Heller	281
THE STORY THAT WON	283



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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

A couple of bits of business this time around . . .

First, we've moved. Having said that, we hasten to say not to worry, those of you who enter the Mysterious Photograph contest and those who submit manuscripts—mail *will* be forwarded. But in future, please use our new address: 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036.

The new address is in the indicia (at the bottom of the contents page) and in the Mysterious Photograph directions, starting with this issue.

The reason for the move is to bring together various parts of the company under one roof. As some of you already know, about a year ago this magazine and the other three fiction magazines formerly owned by

Davis Publications became part of Bantam Doubleday Dell (specifically, part of the Dell Magazines division thereof), which is owned in turn by Bertelsmann, the world's largest book publishing company. Bertelsmann has recently acquired its own midtown skyscraper, to house all its various enterprises here.

The magazine, of course, hasn't changed editorially; we are still ourselves and will remain so. It's just that from now on we'll be found in new quarters.

Second, if you are a *new* subscriber, you may be confused. You may, for instance, have recently received your April issue, followed by the March issue, and, in no time at all, followed by the May issue. We

(continued on page 98)

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Jean Traina**, Design Director; **Terri Czezko**, Art Director; **Anthony Bari**, Junior Designer; **Marilyn Roberts**, Senior Production Manager; **Carole Dixon**, Production Manager; **Cynthia Manson**, Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough**, Contracts Manager; **Barbara Parrott**, Director of Newsstand Circulation; **Bruce Schwartz**, Director of Circulation, Subscription Sales; **Dennis Jones**, Operations Manager, Subscription Sales; **David Mendelson**, Renewal and Billing Manager, Subscription Sales; **Fred Sabloff**, Advertising Director; **Judy Dorman**, Assistant Advertising Sales Manager. **Advertising Offices, New York:** (212) 856-6306. **Advertising Representative:** Dresner Direct, Inc., New York, New York, (212) 889-1078.

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Fiat de Luxe

by Robert Halsted

We were driving back home with our periodic cargo of on-sale mozzarella from Sal's Deli through the fringes of Coral Heights, that hundred-square-mile scab on the face of the Suncoast, when Millie saw the bluegreen Fiat in a driveway.

"I wonder if it's for sale," she ventured.

For a girl who grew up rich, Millie sure was stingy. She needed a car; when I had to be out on business, she was stuck at the end of an island on foot with no way to get anywhere. If she'd had a sudden attack of impetigo, or gone into premature labor (I didn't have any reason to assume she was pregnant, but I always feel compelled to consider distant contingencies) she'd have had a long walk. At any rate, I didn't have to keep her even barefoot, let alone pregnant, to keep her from getting away.

She had almost enough money in the S and L from the insurance settlement on the Honda, getting nowhere fast at five percent, to buy something cheap and new, or used and bet-

ter, plus our well-laundered money from someone else's drug deal, but she balked at actually converting it to wheels.

We'd looked at a few machines, but she said she was waiting for something she really liked. I thought she was just practicing being a pauper's moll, which was a compliment I didn't want to need to accept.

"I like that color," she continued.

I put on the brakes and backed up. It was a neat-looking car, and the paint job was something I'd never seen before—about the color of the three- to four-fathom level at the south end of Seven Mile Bridge in the Keys on a nice July day, a good, nice, rich bluegreen. No wimpy pastels for Signore Fiat.

"No harm in asking," I said, and wormed my way out of the sagging seat of the Subaru through its groaning door.

Subiko, though she'd been a loyal friend, was no longer young and spry. She remembered one hundred thousand miles the way I remembered my twenty-first birthday,



I COULD SEE ONE OF THE PLAINCLOTHESMEN
HIDING IN A CLUMP OF PEPPERTREE.

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through distant mists. Rust was beginning to go beyond a cosmetic problem and become a structural one; all the plastic was cracking from the Florida sun; and she somehow lacked class, though mechanically she was still excellent except for worn synchronizers in the gearbox. I might keep her forever, but not much longer without some kind of backup system.

Millie got out on the passenger side, and we went up the driveway together. The car looked really good—shiny paint and chrome with no rust spots (Fiat is almost as vulnerable as Subaru), practically new Michelins all around. No more than a couple of years old as best I could guess, and a little over twenty thousand on the clock.

She circumambulated it, appreciating things about it, while I went up to knock on the door of the house. There was no answer, and it looked deserted through the window, but they wouldn't have left the car in the open if they planned to be gone for very long.

I took down the address to check back later, Millie sold herself a little more, and we went on home. I would've put the matter in the back of my mind to bring up later, but she was a little bit obsessed, broaching the subject at least

six times a day. So the next time I went out I dropped by again.

No one was still home, and the house still looked deserted—more so, as if they were on a long trip. I've never known whether the look of an empty house or the sound of an empty phone is a psychic perception or based on physical cues I can't identify, but there's a feeling they have.

I took another look at the car. It hadn't been moved. There was a dry ficus leaf under one tire I'd noticed the last time, and pine needles—beginning to drop heavily now as the weather warmed up and the real Dry Season came on—were building up on the top and coachwork.

Well, if they were on vacation, they'd have to be back soon. I penned a note on one of my business cards and jammed it into the crack of the door over the keyhole where they couldn't miss it.

After a few more days, I dropped by again. My note was still on the door and the car still hadn't been moved. I took down the license number of the car on a hunch—it was a Smith County tag—and made sure I still had the address in my cardcase.

There were no nearby neighbors, so I went across the bridge

to Palm City, went to the library, pulled the Coral Heights street directory, and checked out the address. The directory gave a name and phone number and had the legend "seas. res.," meaning snowbird. Just to make sure, I called the number from a pay phone, and it was on seasonal disconnect. Snowbirds for sure, and they'd already flown north for the summer. I went by the county tax office, waited a long time, and finally got a home address up north. The name was right.

When I got home, I called directory assistance for the owner's number but it was unlisted, so I wrote him a brief letter of inquiry about the car and ran up to the little island branch post office to mail it. There wasn't any overwhelming reason to conceal all this from Millie, but I sort of wanted to do the legwork and surprise her with the results if they were positive. Or let her down easy if they weren't.

I got tied up in a couple of dog-work jobs, like color-keying typeset tabular material—a minimum wage office slavey could've done it, but I saw no reason to turn down paying work—and didn't think any more of it for two or three days. Then a phone call came from the Coral Heights snowbird in Illinois. He had no such

car, had no idea what it was doing in his driveway, and would I please report it to the local authorities. I double-checked to make sure I'd tracked down the right snowbird, and I had. I told him I'd take care of it.

Millie schlepped in from the kitchen, taking a break from sharing our mozzarella with Sam and demanding to know what was going on.

I told her it was none of her ruddy business, and she told me she was a better eavesdropper than that. So I told her the story to date.

"I *thought* I smelled a mystery," she said. "But if it's stolen and the police confiscate it, then I couldn't buy it."

"Item A, I think the police usually try to get these things back to their rightful owners. Item B, it may not be for sale anyhow."

"But if it were suspected of a felony, they could confiscate it. I mean, of being used in one. Besides, I *want* it."

I gave a patient groan. "Even if the thief burned out the engine bearings or something?"

"You're handy with tools."

"I'll try to trace the owner tomorrow if you'll amuse me with perverse erotic practices tonight."

"You're on. But your performance had better be as good as mine." She went ahead then

with making supper, and after we ate I went up to the studio to get the last of the schlock jobs off my back.

When I came down she was bending over the stereo putting on sensuous music, attired exclusively in a long feather boa she'd picked up at a thrift shop, and I wondered why at the time, and six inch spike heels. Not only does the girl look good in anything she puts on, she has a lot of originality. Also far more talent as an exotic dancer—et al.—than I'd ever guessed.

The next morning I was on the phone to Tallahassee by a little after eight. I figured I owed her a first-rate job.

I had a couple of cover stories available: he was parked on my property and I wanted to call him before having it towed; I'd scraped his fender in a parking lot and didn't have a card to leave on his windshield. As it happened, I didn't need a story—tag numbers are a public record, and all you gotta do is ask.

The owner turned out to be Dwight W. Hinton of Glade City in Smith County, a little ways east of us. Directory assistance had the number this time, so I called him right up, hoping he wasn't a late sleeper. I caught him getting ready to leave for work.

"You must be mistaken," he insisted. "That car's never left my garage since my daughter married six weeks ago."

I read the tag number and described the car to him, suggested he check it out, and gave him my number to call back.

A little after nine he called me from his office.

"You're right. The car's missing. It must have been stolen from the garage. She parked it when she married, and we never open the garage till the lawn needs mowing. Uh, you say you want to buy it?"

"I'm *interested*. Naturally, I'd have to check it out first. If you can tell me your price and arrange for me to drive it to my mechanic, we can talk. It ought to be moved to a better place anyway. If you can't come over, you could send me the key and a written authorization, and I'll check it out and move it to my place, or wherever you'd prefer, if it's movable. It could've been damaged by the thief, of course."

"Let's hope not. Tell you what, I'll make you a good price. The title's in my name, but it was my daughter's car. But she's moved to California. I'm not sure I can find the key—she might've taken it with her, I know she kept her housekeys. Do you think you can get one made?"

"I think so, if I can see the ignition-lock cylinder to get the code number. I've done it before with a Fiat. Otherwise, the locksmith can probably work from the serial number under the windshield on the dashboard. Do you want some references before you send anything?"

"You sound honest, but I need your name and address. Your place will be fine, and I can get over to Palm City in a week or two to close the deal. How about five thousand?"

"I'd really have to take a look first, Mr. Hinton, and then talk it over with my fiancée. It's her money, I'm just fronting for her."

"I might talk less for ready cash."

It looked real possible, and I was sort of wanting it myself by now. Millie, sleeping off her night's wanton debauchery—though her knight had already slept his off—didn't get up till after we'd finished talking, so I still had surprise on my side.

On the way back from delivering the jobs, I went to Coral Heights. The car was still there, despite my irrational fears it might have been restolen. This time I tried the door, and it was unlocked. I pushed the seat all the way back, squeezed in, and looked

around. Nice. It was basically clean—someone, probably the thief, had left a 7-Eleven soft drink cup and a cigarette package on the floor, but otherwise it was neat and smelled good. The ring of keys was right in the ignition, which only slightly surprised me. After all, the thief was through with it. Experimentally, I turned it on, heard the fuel pump click a few times and stop. Naturally I pumped once to prime the carb, turned the switch a notch further, and cranked it. It was a little slow, but it started. Fortunately, the Fiat has an all-the-way-off switch position that prevents incidental battery drains.

I brushed the pine-tags off the bonnet, opened the engine room, and listened to it purr like an expensive sewing machine. I let it run long enough to pep up the battery, then turned it off and checked various fluids. A-OK, everything clean and topped up, and even a quarter tank of gas left. I decided if the gearbox was okay we'd negotiate for it. I was dying to roadtest it, but chose to wait for the authorization.

I locked everything, put the keys in my pocket, and headed home. I thought Millie was in for a treat, if she wasn't too stingy to give in to it. But infat-

uation is a powerful lever, and I thought she would.

The second day afterward the authorization from Hinton was in the mail, so I asked Millie if she would mind helping me out on a project. Being mostly very easy to get along with most days, she assented, and we drove to Coral Heights. After she began to suspect, I explained to her that we were just going to check it out and nothing was confirmed yet. And that I'd have to be the one to drive it while she followed in Subiko. She pouted a bit, but mostly *pro forma* and perhaps also to turn me on. She has a very sexy pout.

We parked the Subaru, Millie got in the Fiat beside me, and I drove it around the long country block. The gearbox was tight, smooth, and easy—I realized how shot the gear-lever linkage grommets were in the Subi—there was no slop in the drive train and no unwelcome noises. I turned it over to Millie for a try, and she loved it. Her driving style is rather masculine—fast and precise, if a bit too aggressive for her own good. I've been working on her about that. Also on cornering procedures in front- versus rear-drive machines.

When I was finally able to get the wheel back from her, I

drove it home with her tailing. Every time I came to a stop I saw her tongue razzberrying me in the mirror.

We were ready to talk brass tacks with Hinton when we got home. Millie had already sold herself, of course, but I'd checked suspension, steering, and shocks on the way, lugged it, run the tach up to the red line and a hair beyond in first and second, and I was convinced it was a jewel. The two or three tiny flaws in finish and chrome were hardly worth ignoring, though I knew Millie would be touching them up the moment we signed the papers. I detoured us by the bank for Millie to withdraw four thousand dollars in hundreds, figuring we'd start offering at that and work up to a compromise price out of our stashed cash at home. I'd already looked up the Blue Book on the machine, and it was nearly eight grand. A steal even at the five he'd already offered it for.

Millie's a quick study. Sophisticated in some ways and naive in others, she only needs to see the script once. I gave her a quick summary of horse-trading rules and knew we'd work as a team.

As it happened, we didn't need to work at all. I called Hinton, and he'd already come down to four grand on his own.

And it wouldn't be decent to offer less.

It was so easy I wondered if the title was okay, but it was. He needed money badly enough to come to Palm City and sign it over to us the next day but one, all papers in order. We did all the insurance and license procedures in the same trip, including a shaved but still formidable sales tax I'd forgotten came with the tag cost.

I was going to switch the tags the same day, but someone had put the old ones on with long plain steel bolts which had rusted solid. By the time I finished giving up, it was a job for a cold chisel or bolt cutters, so she decided to drive around on the old tag for a day or two till I could get the right tool.

The day or two worked into a week or so. I forgot entirely, and Millie remembered but forgot to remind me. The new tag, with the temporary registration taped to it, was on the table by the front door, and it got covered with other urgent things we put in the same place.

Then one pleasant Tuesday afternoon I got a phone call while Millie was out shopping.

The phone call was from Millie.

"Walt, darling," she began sweetly, "I know you're busy, but would you mind coming

downtown for a minute and bailing me out of jail?"

"Which jail?" I asked, playing along with it.

There was a moment's mumbled aside, then her voice came back on the line. "The county jail, the one in the new courthouse. Not the *old* county jail, which is torn down, nor yet the *city* jail, which is at the police station. Do you think you can find it?"

"Millie, are you *serious*?"

"My dear, I was never more serious in my whole life. And if I decide this is all your fault—a possibility I'm *seriously* considering—I'll be very serious indeed."

"Ah, uh—may I ask what you're doing there?"

"Waiting for you to get me out."

"Don't be petulant, it doesn't motivate me. Tell me what the charge is."

"*That* one I have memorized. Grand Theft, Vehicle."

"You're joking!"

"I thought for a while *they* were. Then they handcuffed me."

"Handcuffed you?"

"It's a new rule. All suspected felons have to be handcuffed. I *will* say, the deputy was apologetic about it."

"Sweetie, I'll be there as soon as I can. Without getting busted myself."

I had presence of mind enough to grab the new tag and the yellow registration slip on my way out. I hoped Millie had the other stuff with her. I went to the wrong gate the first time, got re-referred to a second place, and was finally escorted to the Detective Division. While Millie languished and, worse, stewed. The more she stewed, the bigger Dutch I was in. If you think I can't be scared by a woman twenty years younger, sixty pounds lighter, and ten inches shorter than me, try me. I was thinking all along that we hadn't used up the ten days' grace period they give you for getting all the papers straight and tags changed, but I was no more certain that sweet reason would prevail with the law than I was it would with Millie.

They put me in a conference room, and at long last a detective came in. While I was showing him the new tags and registration, a muscular matron came in with Millie. Firmly by the elbow but no cuffs, I was glad to see.

We explained our case to the detective, waited another half hour while they sent a man to get the papers out of Millie's glovebox, which had been towed somewhere. He looked everything over, went out, and came back a good while later.

"Man says he never called in a stolen report, didn't know it was stolen till you called him wanting to buy it. Says you're okay and bought it fair and square. Can't trace your new title in Tallahassee, but the local records say you applied and it's being processed. *You* didn't call in a report on it, did you?" Looking right at me. Millie gave me a *very* strange look. I'd seen her eyes all kinds of other colors before, but all through this interview they had been a pale, cold, glacial blue. I dreaded my first minute alone with her.

"Heavens, no!" I answered. "I've got enough problems already."

"He's telling the truth, officer. He *does* have enough problems already."

"Before she nails you to the wall, mister," he said, turning to me, "we never would've checked out that tag number if she hadn't been tailgating one of our plainclothes cars. But the following-too-close ticket hasn't been written yet, and we could all just kinda forget any of this ever happened."

I agreed with the guy, wholeheartedly. "You mean she doesn't get the original ticket and saves points on her driving record, you save taxpayers' money by not defending a false arrest suit we couldn't win any-

how" (I'd already figured that one out), "and we both hope she doesn't kill me when we get home?"

"That's about it. Not getting that ticket'll save her money on insurance renewal, too."

That got me off the hook. Her eyes turned brown. She might do something devious now, but direct assault was out.

We got directions to where the car was impounded and a chit to bail it out with. On the way out of the courthouse I said to Millie, "I'm sorry I got you busted, luv."

"You really weren't that naughty, Walt. Though for a while I would have done cruel things indeed to you. But I wonder who did report it stolen."

"Maybe the thief himself. Guilt feelings or maybe he had to take his dying stepmother to the hospital and there was no other way, but he wanted to rectify it."

"You didn't, did you, Walt? Really didn't, just for a joke? A sick, diseased, but not basically malicious joke?"

"No, my darling. I'm dumb, but not that dumb."

She squeezed my hand. "I'm sorry I doubted you. My dear old straight Walt."

"Don't say 'old.'"

"I like molesters. Don't hide your colors."

She gave me a sweet kiss, there in front of the sheriff's office. As we were finishing, a young deputy coming out of the entrance stopped and said, "Sorry about the cuffs, ma'am. It's orders."

Millie smiled sweetly at him. "That's all right. Eichmann *almost* got off on that plea." He had no idea who Eichmann was, or had been. But Millie has a keen grasp of history and will not be condemned to repeat old mistakes. Though she may invent new ones.

We located her car, went through procedures, and picked it up. They hadn't put a scratch on it. She looked, and would have acted if they had. I followed her home, and she didn't tailgate anybody. As soon as we got home, I chewed the old bolts off with tools on hand and put the new tag on with rustproof ones. She complained that the date validation stickers didn't go well with the color of the car. I told her to think of them as accents, like rare stamps on an old envelope or a vermillion seal on a Chinese painting.

"You know," she said later, "there was a lot of anthropology in that jail."

"Traumatized?"

"Not exactly. It's too unreal. But I reserve the right to go into shock when I assimilate it." She shook her head. "They

were mostly younger than me, except for a couple of hard cases and a fat old drunk sleeping it off in the corner. I don't think I really like that environment. Stop me if I ever get into prostitution or drug dealing. And I want a bath, right now."

I gave her a hug. "I have some guilt feelings about getting you juggled."

"I wouldn't take for the experience. I'm dying to go back north and tell Mother's bridge club all about it. But I may use your guilt feelings to manipulate you later when I want something." She squeezed me and went off to shower.

While she was bathing, I went in and handed a bar of soap over the curtain rail to her.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Sam's flea soap. I think it works on lice, too."

She threw it back at me, along with a big handful of water.

Days later, she said for the innumerable time, "I wonder who did turn in that stolen report."

"Actually, the Dwight W. Hinton we bought it from stole it from the real Dwight W. Hinton who accidentally had the same address."

"Be serious."

"Seriously, then, if it's nagging you that much, you might

want to tell Jim all about it. Then y'all could track him down. While I get on with *business*."

"You wouldn't miss it for the world. I think I will." So saying, she called the *Mary Jo*, talked girl-talk with Janie for a while, then gave Jim a quick rundown of the plot. He was intrigued, of course, and he and Janie wanted to see the car anyhow, so Millie invited them out to tea. Which to Millie means tea and cakes, coffee to me, and a can of beer to Jim.

"Looks okay," said Jim. High praise from him. "Got any pictures of it?"

"Not developed yet. I did a few shots, mostly with Millie. I was gonna do one with Millie, nude, draped along the hood, and submit it to *Penthouse*, but we didn't get around to it yet."

"*Playboy's* more literate," Millie said thoughtfully. Unless she was being too tongue-in-cheek to catch.

"I'd like a few prints of the car, no girl, to do my research with."

"We can do a few more shots and you can take the roll up to Russ at One Hour if you're in a hurry. We don't have enough of Millie and me together, you can shoot us while you're here."

"Us, too," said Janie. "I don't have any proof I ever knew this man."

We did several shots of us, one by one and together, plus a couple of the four of us with an automatic timing gadget I didn't trust. I was sure it would click on time, but not how we'd be looking then.

"Now, while you serve me my can o' tea and the rest o' y'all nibble ladyfingers and cucumber sandwiches, I'll tell you my theory and proposed investigation," said Jim when the roll was finished.

We migrated indoors. Millie actually had made cucumber sandwiches. She can't stand them because of her socially correct mother, I can't stand them because they taste like cucumber sandwiches, but she can't resist shocking Jim. Jim—as Millie had known—couldn't resist trying one. He took a bite, made a face, manfully choked down what was left. All the time ostentatiously holding his can of beer with his pinky stuck out. The ones Millie and I were eating from the far side of the plate had a healthy dose of cream cheese and anchovy to kill the cucumber taste.

"Now, here's my theory, folks," said Jim after he'd washed the morsel down with a healthy swig of Bud.

"Hypothesis," Millie corrected him. He stuck a cucum-

ber sandwich—a plain one—in her mouth and continued.

"This is not your typical car thief. He musta had some conscience to call in a report on a car he stole. Or, to begin at the beginnin', unless the owner was playin' games, and no good reason to assume he was, somebody else turned in the report. This leaves two other possibilities—somebody saw it stolen and wanted to straighten out the matter without gettin' involved, or the thief himself, or herself, called it in after they were through joyridin'. Now, the probability is that it *was* the thief, 'cause anybody else most likely woulda said, 'Joe Jones drove it away,' or 'It was headed west on Route 80.'

"So . . . my best guess is that it was a friend of the family, so to speak—somebody they knew who took the machine out for a relatively innocent joyride. For some reason he couldn't get it back—maybe he thought the law was tailin' him, pulled it into the first driveway he saw, and hightailed it through the woods—but when it didn't come back home, he wanted the cops to look for it, so he called in a report. You said the owner didn't even know it was missin', and maybe the thief knew this.

"There's *somethin'* here I haven't thought of, and I'm not

satisfied with it, but I think I'm right so far. So I'm gonna go out to Glade City and see what I can find out. By myself first time—I'll report back to y'all later. I don't suppose," he added, looking me in the eye, "you even thought about prints?"

"Sure I did. Right after I checked it out and drove it around the block." He didn't even say something sarcastic, he just snorted and shook his head.

We kept ourselves busy the next couple of days and didn't notice we hadn't heard from Jim until he came rolling up the driveway. He bore two big brown Winn-Dixie bags with green things sticking out the tops and seams.

"Brought you enough cucumbers to make a year's supply o' sandwiches," he told Millie. "If they keep."

Millie looked a bit overwhelmed, but brightened when I said to Jim, "You better want homemade kosher dills for Christmas." She's been studying pickling under me (the major amateur error is to use table salt instead of pickling salt) and is ready to go on her own. We don't eat a lot of pickles, but we give away scads of them, and I must say that our pickled

jalapeños have an exclusive but fiercely loyal following.

"Been out in farm country," Jim continued, ignoring me. "Got a good price. Got a cold one handy?" Millie sashayed off into the kitchen, both of us watching her incomparable bottom, to fetch him a brew.

"But mostly I came to report. I did some checkin' out Glade City way and got a lead I want to follow up. I thought you might want to be in on the showdown."

I'd been thinking about this since our first discussion. "I dunno, Jim. Millie has the car now, it wasn't damaged, and the guy got paid for it. Nothing could be proved. What good would it do?"

"Might steer a kid away from a life o' crime. Besides, there's my famous incurable curiosity—I got a feelin' there's more here than we see yet."

"No impersonating an officer?"

"No more'n usual." Jim never claims to be a cop, but he's very good—or bad—at letting people assume, which they do, that he is. Total strangers will come up to him, so sure he is one that they won't even listen to his disclaimers.

"What I did, after I had a short chat with Hinton," Jim went on, "was to look for a place where teenagers hang out.

That 7-Eleven cup you found in the car gave me a startin' place. Sure enough, the one near the high school—and remember, the girl whose car it was only graduated last June, so she'd'a' been in with a lot o' the same bunch that're in school now—anyhow, that 7-Eleven was like an after-hours club for the school 'crowd, loiterin' around and the manager once in a while trying to shovel a path through 'em so the paying customers could get in and out.

"So I pulled in, lookin' hot, tired, and thirsty, which I was, and got me a cold beer in a brown bag. I found me a spot to lean on out front, and in a little while I was talkin' with a couple of the high school boys about cars. Not hard to make an opportunity if you look for openings and have a little idea what you're talkin' about.

"It was less easy to work the subject around to what I really wanted to talk about without soundin' like it was what I wanted to talk about in the first place, but if you practice a while, leadin' a conversation is sorta like the old Twenty Questions—just keep headin' in the right direction and you end up where you wanted to go."

The thought of beer must have revived his thirst. He took another noisy draft and went on with his story.

"It so happened I was lookin' for a car for my girlfriend, we just moved to Glade City a couple months back—this explained my not knowin' the town and havin' Mosby County tags—we're back down a country road on the west edge o' town that I noticed the name of as I drove by. You know some of my plays and cover stories.

"Anyhow, the kinda car we were looking for was like a little bluegreen Fiat used to drive around town, we hadn't seen it lately. One o' the boys started to say, "Oh, Bret's car," and got a quick look from the other'n, who said it was Deanna's car, she just let Bret drive it once in a while."

He took a big swig from the can of Bud. "I got a little more information from them, and it matched what I got from Hinton. Like Bret lives next door to him and used to drive it. So I'm thinking of showing up there between two and five tomorrow, when Bret might be home and the grownups wouldn't. If you don't want to come along, I'll just borrow Millie for the afternoon."

"I barely trust you with a cucumber sandwich, let alone my girl. I'd better come along, too."

So early the next afternoon the four of us went over to Glade City. It was really Jim's trip. For the girls, both of

whom don't get as many outings as they'd like—and this worries me sometimes for relational reasons—it was a bit of a lark. My role was as a sort of backup man; at six three and a half, I look like a reserve of muscle, as long as I stay in the background.

We parked in an out-of-the-way place across the main road from Hinton's—and Bret's—block and waited for the school bus. Jim figured that Bret, probably having no car of his own, would most likely ride the bus instead of hanging around with the after-school crowd.

Sure enough, the big yellow school bus stopped at the corner across from us and discharged a clot of miscellaneous adolescents. One of them, after the appropriate tribal rituals, ambled his way up to the cul-de-sac where Millie's Fiat used to live.

Jim started the car after the boy was a little way up the block, crossed the main road, and drove past him, all of us studiously not watching him. Jim stopped in front of Hinton's house and was looking around, me off to one side, when the boy came by.

"Excuse me," Jim stopped him. "I'm looking for a man named Hinton. Is this the right house?"

"Yeah," the boy said. "He wouldn't be home now. They work downtown."

"Reason I was looking for him," Jim persisted, "you might know something about. I was interested in a car I heard he has for sale. A Fiat convertible."

Bret's eyes went opaque, like the third eyelid closing on a cat or bird. "I don't know anything about it." He turned to go.

"Just a minute, Bret." Jim's voice was low-key but very penetrating. The kid stopped in his tracks like he'd walked into a fence. "You know a lot you haven't said yet. I think there's a good chance to avoid prosecution if you tell the whole story. Now."

Bret stood there, paralyzed with indecision. Jim went on, bluffing on assumptions I wouldn't have dared to assume in the first place, let alone say out loud. "We might even decide you had permission from Deanna, and overlook your—I think we could say illegal entry into the garage if we can catch the real thief."

He looked more relieved than otherwise when he gave in. Jim pushed him gently along. "Start from before Deanna got married. So she used to let you drive it."

"Yeah, it was sorta like, y'know, when I needed a car for

a little while, or if I had a special date, Deanna'd let me use it. I'd put gas in and everything, and I helped her keep it up. It's not like I was just *using* her."

"Okay, I understand," said Jim almost gently.

"Then, I guess it wasn't right, but when we finished getting her stuff moved out of the house, and she told me to pull it in the garage and close it and give her dad the keys... you know, I just couldn't stand to let it go, and him not even using it. So I just sort of didn't get around to giving him the keys. I'd come in sometimes when they weren't home and just dust it or check the oil or something. I didn't want it to go dead in storage."

"Go ahead."

"Okay... well, a couple of weeks ago I had a date with this dynamite girl, y'know? I mean, really a bomb. You know. A tall sexy redhead. I took her—well... I really wanted to impress her, like, so I just kinda borrowed Deanna's car. She'd have lent it to me if she'd been here...."

"Keep goin'. We know most of it. You just quietly opened the garage door. Kept your hand on the handle so the latch wouldn't make a noise, rolled it up real slow and easy." I glanced at the door. Jim had al-

ready noticed it was the roll-up, not the swing-up or swing-out, kind. "Did it start when you let it roll down the driveway and popped the clutch, or did you have to use the starter?"

He looked at Jim in wonder. "Not enough slope. But the starter's quiet. Then I just drove down the block real slow in second with the lights off. Then I went to meet Dawn and we went for a pizza and then a movie.

"Partway through the feature she went to get some mints. I gave her a couple of dollars to get them. She didn't come back, so I waited for a while, then went to look for her. She wasn't at the candy counter, the concession, so I went and waited for her by the restroom, and finally asked a lady to check it for me. She wasn't there. So I went back to our seat, and she hadn't come back. The popcorn lady hadn't seen her."

"You got walked out on," Jim said bluntly.

"Looks like it," the boy answered with an embarrassed—and, I thought, still pained—grin. "I was worried at first. I thought she really liked me."

"Held your hand, leaned her head on your shoulder? Maybe even more?"

Bret blushed crimson.
"Yeah."

"Then she had to have mints, and that's the last time you saw her."

"Yeah. I still don't know what I did wrong."

"You did two things wrong," said Jim. "Wrong girl, wrong car. Be glad that was the last you saw of her. You lucked out. Continue."

Mostly the boy wanted to talk, though Jim had to winkle a couple of items out of him. He gave up on Dawn and went out to the car. It wasn't there. The keys weren't in his pocket, where he was sure he'd put them. No, he didn't make the connection for a while, and then he didn't want to admit it. He was scared spitless, waited a few days, and finally phoned in an anonymous tip.

Though by now the boy knew beyond doubt he'd been had, he was still inhibited in talking about Dawn. Partly from embarrassment and partly from misguided gallantry. But Jim alternately ground him down and cajoled him till we had the whole story. An acquaintance had introduced them in a crowd, but when he tried to track her down, nobody remembered who'd first brought her in. He was sure she was from out of town, but didn't know where she'd come from. They

met for the date at the drug-store, so he never knew where she lived or was staying.

The description as we pieced it together was pretty recognizable: five nine or ten, red-type hair, slim, not really pretty but nonetheless goodlooking, and apparently sexier than average for girls that age. Which is sexy enough.

On an inspired impulse, I asked Bret to fetch me a scratchpad and pencil, and I played police artist. After several tries, I ended up with a likeness he agreed with—the least bit horsefaced but not at all unattractive, closer to handsome than pretty but I could see from my sketch how a male might respond to the live person. Add the red hair and a willowy young body that wiggled in the right places, and you got jailbait. I took notes on color for a finished sketch later—from his description, including freckles and green eyes, I was pretty sure she was wearing her natural hair, light auburn sunbleaching to coppery.

The history of the case pushed buttons in all of us—Jim for his dislike of law-breakers, me because of adolescent experiences, the girls because it gave their kind a bad name. We were all out to get Dawn. Not that we knew what

we'd do with her when we got her—we'd work on that later.

After we got back home, it was a matter of a few minutes to reduce the penciled sketch to a credible watercolor. I thought I might take up serious portraiture some day. I handed the likeness to Jim, and he and Janie headed up the road.

A couple of days after that, Jim pulled into the driveway, hailed us from the porch, and came on in. Someday he's going to catch an interesting eyeful that way.

"Got a two-beer thirst and a story to tell," he announced. "Anybody buyin'?" Millie, the perpetual Hebe so far as Jim was concerned, fetched him a Bud and a coaster. We waited while he took a first noisy draft out of the can. She always puts out a glass, and he never uses it.

"After I thought about it a while," he began, "I thought I had this girl Dawn's pattern, her M.O., pretty well figured out. Or at least a healthy guess.

"First of all, it seemed to me she'd got to where she was goin' to—she didn't run the car till she ruined it or wrecked it or ran out o' gas. Didn't leave it dead by the side of the road, but pulled it into an empty driveway and went on from there.

"Outside chance she met somebody on the road, took up

with 'em, and headed to Arizona, putting the car outa sight to cover her tracks. Most likely, though, she was close enough to her destination to walk."

He finished the rest of the brew at a single upending and held out the empty to Millie. She sighed patiently and brought him another. "So?" she demanded.

"What I did then," he continued, "was to go out to where y'all found the car and circle around lookin' for possible destinations. It's mostly residential out there, what isn't open country, but there's a through road just a couple o' blocks away that has a 7-Eleven on it." I remembered the road, which I sometimes use, and the store, which I don't. "No more'n a quarter-mile walk, maybe. The house isn't as isolated as it looks."

"So what have you found out?" I asked.

"I'm *gettin'* to it. Figuring she has a predilection for 7-Elevens, I decided to focus on that, but first I'd scout around. I just kinda leisurely cruised the neighborhood, looking for another destination—for sure, she didn't drive all the way over from Glade City just to go to a convenience store, though if she was in the neighborhood she'd sooner or later show up there."

"We're making a lot of assumptions here," Millie put in.

"Ninety percent probability," Jim retorted. "If I guess wrong, I can always start over. No bones broken, and I don't have to build a case I can take to court.

"So . . . to continue answerin' your question despite interruptions, what I've found is one probable house, looks like a drifters' nest, you know the kinda place. There's maybe a couple, maybe a little-older man or woman, sometimes just roommates, running the place. May do odd jobs, a little low-key dope dealin', to cover the rent, and an odd lot of people trickle through—runaways, friends that get evicted, fugitives on the lam, just plain drifters. A kind of runnin' house party. These places have a kind of look to 'em: lawn not mowed, trashcans left out, old copies of shoppers not picked up outa the driveway, maybe more cars than there's room for—but not the same as if hillbillies lived there. You've seen them."

We both nodded. I'd crashed in places like that a couple of times during a period of my life, nearly found myself running one once till I learned to say no. Millie, I was sure, had during her party years been slumming in them for an evening. Most college students seem to experi-

ment for a while with low company, possibly excluding those in small Southern Bible colleges and I'm not even sure about them.

"Well," Jim resumed, "I talked with the 7-Eleven clerks on different shifts—didn't bother with early mornin', not likely to be up by then. Just told 'em I was lookin' for a friend's daughter, and showed 'em the picture. Two of 'em were pretty sure your picture was of a girl who'd been in. She's a regular, but not at regular hours—anytime from lunch to small hours o' the night—soft drinks, junk food, cigarettes. Description sounded right to 'em, down to the way she wiggles her ankles when she walks."

"Ankles?"

"More or less."

"More, I'd guess. Now, if I hear you right," I said, "you think Dawn's staying in this 'drifters' nest.' You plan to flush her out?"

"Might as well, now we've gone this far."

"Not meaning to repeat what's already been said, but what'll you do with her when you get her?"

"Forgot to tell you. I had a talk with a guy."

"Oh?"

"Friend o' mine on the Coral Heights police force. Good-

hearted guy, detective. A little soft on juveniles, which he mostly does—got four kids of his own. I thought Dawn might be known *in* the Heights, since she *knows* the Heights, or seemed to. Took him a little while to remember, but refreshed by the artwork—that is a pretty good picture—he had enough recall to find her folder in his files. Her last name's Finnegan, by the way."

I nearly blushed at the unexpected compliment, and wasn't surprised at the Irish name.

"Anyhow," continued Jim, "once he saw the folder, his memory come back. Puttin' it briefly, which he didn't, he stuck his neck out for her, she was on a runaway charge, and she double-crossed him. He wouldn't mind gettin' her back in custody on the old charges, which she didn't finish payin' for. He's still got a soft spot for the kid, figures the state school's a better place for her than elsewhere she might be."

"So, he's got 'information received.' Looks like you did him a favor."

"He'd like another one. How'd you'n your lady like to knock on the door and ask for her?"

"Not very much," I answered honestly.

"We'd love it," said Millie. Guess who won.

*

We had a brief strategy conference with the detective, a middle-aged guy named Mike Michaels who did, as Jim had said, seem quite decent. He wanted not just to take Dawn, but to break up the nest of drifters. Half of them, he figured, would have bench warrants out against them. The balance could at least be held for a while on miscellaneous charges related to Dawn's presence.

Michaels had a couple of uniforms to cover the rear, himself and another plainclothes man to close in from the front, according to how things went when we were at the door. Our last official act would be to get the heck out of the way when the action started.

One of the few nice things about Coral Heights is that when the developer bulldozed his hundred sections, it opened an ecological niche for a lot of weed trees, so that unbuilt or neglected areas boast heavy thickets of Brazilian peppertrees, cajeput, and scrub oak. These formed a screen for the raiding party and, later, for us. I was assuming that nobody on either side was the least bit interested in guns. An erroneous assumption as it turned out.

When the moment came, I had less stagefright than I expected. Actually, Millie carried

the whole show—I was just a sort of extra in the wings. We drove in the Fiat to a rendezvous in Coral Heights, checked with Michaels and Co., delayed our entry till they could get in position, and then went to Dawn's hideout.

A depressing place—a window screen hanging half off, cracked glass, beer cans in the yard. Some absentee landlord up north was going to regret this tenancy. Millie walked boldly—if carefully—to the door and boldly knocked. After a couple of tries a stoned-looking thirtyish slob came to the door.

"I'd like to see Dawn, please."

"Dawn who?"

"Tall redheaded Dawn. About my car."

"Nobody here by that name," said a voice behind the guy.

"We'll see," replied Millie in her no-nonsense ladylike voice. "If she won't see me, I'll be back in an hour with a policeman. Take a *good* look at my car so you can describe it to her." She smiled sweetly, turned, and left before they could respond. I put her into the Fiat, shoehorned myself into the passenger seat, and away we went. We drove maybe half a mile to end up on the next street, a block away from the front of the house. There were a few other houses in the neighborhood, but

mostly it was fields and thickets.

Keeping out of sight of the house, we walked through the weedy block till we reached a vantage point where we could see through the scrub without being seen. I could see one of the plainclothesmen hiding in a clump of peppertree. We were back out of sight in the clear, covered by the scrub and near a trail that came through it.

The action started sooner than I expected, and there was more of it. From what I could see, Dawn—whom I had no trouble recognizing—came out the front door carrying a small bag and started across the street toward the footpath we were near.

I heard more than saw one of the plainclothesmen leave cover when one of them shouted, "There she is!"

There was a lot of commotion and yelling, then I heard two shots from the house. Whether they were shooting at the cops, or for some reason at Dawn, I never learned. At the sound of the shots I hit the deck, dragging Millie down with me. There was one delayed shot from our side of the street, then I heard shouts in the back.

About then I realized that Dawn had never come through the bush. Keeping a low profile, I moved to the footpath and

there she was in the pepper-trees, squirming on the ground.

"She's hit," I called to Millie, and went to see her. It takes courage for me to face a bullet, which I've done only a couple of times in my life, and then only when unavoidable; it takes a lot more for me to face somebody who's been hit by one and may be dying or crippled, and certainly suffering.

She was biting her lip, face twisted in pain. I put a hand on her shoulder. "Where are you hit?" I asked. She was too busy moaning to answer, but with her free hand she reached toward her rear end. The tight mound of her jeans had a hole in it, and blood was oozing out of one shapely cheek. I half laughed with relief that it hadn't hit her spine.

"Not as bad as it could be, kid. You'll be walking soon but not sitting down for a while."

By now Millie had arrived. She held the girl's hand and said comforting things. Millie has a lot more nurturance toward other women than most I've known. If her mother is as awful as I've come to suspect, I'm not sure where she got it, but it's there. Maybe it was instant learning from Janie, from when she was battered.

Before the party died down it got bigger. Squad cars arrived, then an ambulance. Then

somebody saw smoke and called the fire department, but before they arrived the cops had put it out with an extinguisher from a squad car, saving evidence somebody wanted destroyed.

It turned out, we heard after the dust settled, to have been a considerably bigger operation than the safe house Jim had hypothesized. Besides enough bagged marijuana to stuff sofa pillows with, there were coke and crack and smack and things I never heard of before, all in greater quantities than required for home consumption. They all squealed on each other—this generation of criminals doesn't have the moral fibre of its predecessors—and the whole crowd got kept off the streets for a while yet to come.

Dawn got off pretty easy—the state nol-prossed any charges but violation of probation, and she went back to the Sassachobee girls' school after she got out of the hospital. With enough stuff hanging over her head to be tried as an adult if she steps off the straight and narrow the next few years. Which may serve as a deterrent. Or may not.

"Four to one the wrong way, as I see it," said Jim afterwards as we sat on the porch. I'd broken my tradition against daytime drinking and was having

a dry rum-and-lime over a lot of rocks. "Seen girls like her before. Hardheaded, by the time they learn they're over the hill."

"I can't help feeling responsible," said Millie. "If I hadn't been so curious, she might not have been shot."

"All you did was keep her outa worse trouble for a while, Millie," Jim answered, gently for him. "She'd'a been burnt out in a year with that crowd. That wasn't one o' our bullets in her bottom, by the way—that was some bad crowd. There's a chance now, not a big one, this'll straighten the girl out."

"I hope so," said Millie. We were all sort of depressed at the size of the problem, thousands upon thousands of girls like Dawn running loose, and quick and easy roads to perdition open everywhere they turned. "I really hope so."

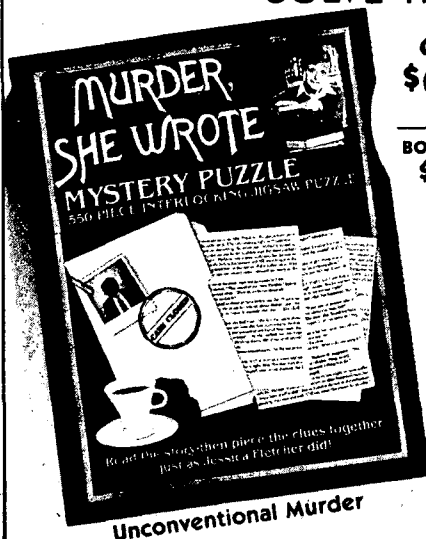
It was about a year later, and Millie and I had been through

more changes than I could count, before we got to the end of the story. Millie thought she saw Dawn carrying a baby out of the K-mart in North Palm Plaza. She turned back through the parking lot to get a closer look but lost her. But she told Janie, Janie told Jim, Jim called Mike Michaels, who checked with Sassachobee, and by that time I'd totally forgotten about it till Millie heard the news and reminded me.

It turned out that Dawn had been just a little bit pregnant at the time of her escapade, or at least the escapade that concerned us, and it was her and her baby Millie saw. Right after the baby was born she turned eighteen and was released from Sassachobee, moved in with an older man who had sheltered her a couple of times during her wild youth, and to all appearances was settling down to a—relatively—respectable motherhood. We hoped she was.

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Fate Is a Four Letter Word

by Terry Courtney

Man is by nature greedy and opportunistic. I am a man. Therefore, I am greedy and opportunistic. That is called a syllogism. I know that because I am college educated and until recently believed I was reasonably intelligent. After what I did, however, I now think I might well be the end product of extensive inbreeding. Jed Clampett could probably give me points and the tie and still beat me in a one on one I.Q. contest.

I should have known better, but then we are all aware of the uncanny accuracy of hindsight. It was absolute madness to believe I could score a financial coup off a group of citizens whose ancestors all came to this country from Sicily. But fate nudged and prodded me, as fate is prone to do to us humans, and my greedy and opportunistic nature caused me to fall blindly into step, like a lemming heading for the deep end.

My road to nowhere began in Chicago almost two years ago. I was working as a paralegal

and legal assistant in a large law firm on LaSalle Street, the type of firm with the names of six partners on the door, one of them the token Irishman. The firm employed seventy attorneys plus the usual corps of anonymous support personnel, of which I was the senior, having been there sixteen years. Twelve of the lawyers were specialists, working almost exclusively for the above-named group of citizens. Most of this legal work involved the acquisition of legitimate enterprises purchased with illegitimate cash, plus assorted trial work when those impish citizens were caught trying to turn a dollar in a manner frowned upon by one authority or another. Those clients accounted for about twenty percent of the firm's gross billing, which made them preferred customers.

I was happy then. I earned a decent salary and, being single, could indulge in some frills that made life more tolerable. It was a good period in my life, although at the time I didn't appreciate just how good it was.

Well, one beautiful spring morning the inevitable happened. The federal government unsealed thirty-seven indictments covering something like three hundred and sixty-two charges ranging from dealing in stolen property and loan-sharking to murder and the ordering of same. Overnight thirty-seven of our preferred customers were out on bail.

There was a brief flurry of activity among our specialists as they finally earned their big bucks, working day and night, lunches a fond memory. And some of their clients who heretofore had been only names and occasional photos in the newspapers began dropping into the office from time to time for private consultations. Eventually calm returned as the usual legal maneuvering began and consumed time: continuances, motions, more continuances, additional motions. The trials didn't begin for eighteen months. As the trial date neared, one man was in the office almost daily: Solly Greene, head bean counter for our troubled clients. Solly the accountant, magician of the decimal point, a man who went to Switzerland more often than he went to see his mother.

The trials finally began, and on the second day the unthinkable occurred: the government

put Solly Greene on the witness stand as its star turn. Solly had turned informer! Pandemonium ruled among our specialists and we began to call their corner of our floor Mudville, for there certainly was no joy there. Solly held forth on the witness stand for twenty-four days, painstakingly explaining in great detail ledgers, account books, bank statements, and computer printouts. By the time Solly's aria hit the final note and he was hustled out a back door, the outcome of the trials was a foregone conclusion. Sure enough, a few weeks later thirty-seven members of the St. Francis of Assisi Social Club packed their bags and took up residence in various government facilities around the country. Solly Greene changed his address, too, but no one knew where. As expected, Solly was swallowed whole by the Federal Witness Protection Program.

The sentence handed down ranged from three years to life without parole. The lesser sentences for the most part went to foot soldiers and errand boys and grew incrementally longer as they moved up the hierarchy of the organization; therefore, those with the most reason to hate Solly were also those best able to do something about it should the opportunity ever

present itself. That a contract was put out on Solly was a given, but rumors and speculation flew as to the exact dollar amount. Finally one of our attorneys in a position to know told us all the boys had chipped in and the amount being offered for Solly's head, or parts south, was one million dollars. What we were dealing with here were textbook sore losers.

Five months before the trials ended, my dear, sweet, lovable, and incidentally generous old Aunt Gladys died. Just when the trials were over, her will was finally probated, and after Uncle Suck and the State of Illinois tired of their *ménage à trois* with my inheritance, I cleared seventy-eight thousand dollars. That was enough money to cause me to take a serious look at an idea I had been toying with for years: freelance paralegal services. We dealt with many law firms too small to afford a full time paralegal while needing such services on occasion. My idea was to start my own business, offering my services on an hourly basis. I contacted twenty or so of those small law firms and got a positive response to my proposal. I told them all I would be starting in three months, banked forty-eight thousand dollars, resigned my position, and, with the remaining thirty thousand,

took off on all the vacations I never had, all in a row.

It was glorious. A month in Paris, two weeks in Acapulco, the next two in the Virgin Islands. From St. Thomas I flew back to Chicago, got in my three-year-old Vette, and headed west for Las Vegas. Along the way I saw some old battlefields, some older Indian ruins, and one not old at all divorcee in a suburb of Albuquerque. When I finally reached Las Vegas, I stayed one hour. I checked into the Sahara, went down to the casino, and lost five hundred dollars at a crap table in the time it takes me to blow my nose. Not wanting my vacation to end in the next hour, I checked right back out, explaining to a desk clerk of indeterminate gender that I had found a scorpion in my bed. After much fluttering of hands and profuse apologies he or she comped my room, so it wasn't a total loss.

And this is where fate began to pull the strings in earnest. If my sister and her family had moved almost anywhere but Portland, Oregon; if my sister had not recommended . . . but I'm getting ahead of myself. Before I left Las Vegas, I called my sister in Portland and told her I would be up in a few days for a visit. She was pleased. We hadn't seen each other in four

years. I headed west to the coast, then north on Highway 101. In northern Oregon I hung a right at Tillamook and made Portland in time for supper. Three days at my sister's house was plenty. She has teenage children. And now I can tell you about fate. When I told my sister I was going to wind up my vacation in San Diego on a rented boat, she could have smiled. But no, she suggested I try a different route south, namely Route 5. Scenic, she said. Different, she explained. You'll enjoy it, she insisted. I took Route 5.

And fate rode with me every mile of the way. I still had half a tank of gas when I filled up in Eugene for no other reason than I had to use the restroom. Fate was pressing on my bladder, for that fillup took me to Medford. Not Roseburg or Grants Pass or Ashland, but exactly to Medford.

Medford, Oregon, is a nice little town, population 45,900, the county seat. I pulled into a gas station where a teenager with greasy overalls, shoes, and hands was sitting on an overturned box eating a greasy pizza. I had to honk twice to get his attention, and when he finally strolled over, I saw that his face looked a lot like his pizza. I told him to fill it up with super unleaded, noticed a

fast food shop across the street, and told the kid I'd be right back. Fate had given me an appetite. I dodged some traffic, went in and bought a burger, fries, and a soda. I was at the front door when fate completed its design for me. If I had been two minutes earlier or later, it would never have happened, but fate owns a stopwatch. As I started to open the door, Solly Greene strolled past the front of the shop. *The Solly Greene!* Million dollar Solly! I had a very hot flash.

There was no doubt it was Solly. True, back in Chicago he always wore a suit and tie and now he had on baggy slacks, a plaid shirt, and a windbreaker, but he looked exactly the same; short, round body, round face, puffy eyes, bald with a horseshoe of gray hair from ear to ear. Sleepy, that was it. Solly always looked sleepy.

I stood in front of the hamburger stand and watched Solly go into a store on the near corner. The food went into a litter basket. I ran over, paid for my gas, and pulled out to park in front of a drugstore two doors down from the business Solly had entered. It was a franchise copy store. After twenty minutes Solly hadn't come out.

I knew Solly would never recognize me. At the law firm I had been one of the nameless,

faceless crew sitting in front of CRT's banging away at keyboards or paging through law books. I went into the drugstore and bought the local newspaper. There was an article on the front page I could use. The local high school debating team had won the state championship arguing the pro on the burning question, Should Vice President Quayle be prohibited by federal law from making public statements? Seemed to me they had a cakewalk.

I carefully tore out the article and took it into the copy shop. Solly was standing behind the counter reading a magazine. He looked up at me through half closed eyes with no sign of recognition. I asked for ten copies of the article, and Solly took it to a machine. The license on the wall showed that Walter Klein owned the business. When Solly brought the copies back, I said, "You own this store?"

"Uh-huh. Why?"

"I'm from up in Eugene, and I've been looking around for a small business. Nothing elaborate. I was just wondering how much it takes to start up one of these stores?"

"Depends on how big you want to go." Solly looked around the shop. "I'm small. Two copiers and an offset press. I don't even do graphics. You

can go a lot bigger." He reached under the counter and came up with a slick brochure. "Call that number. The home office will lay it out for you."

All that was to confirm that Solly was now Walter Klein. I thanked him, paid for the copies, and went outside where the copies landed on top of my lunch. The drugstore had a public telephone, and Walter Klein was listed in the book. I wrote down the name, address, and telephone number, went out and added the business name and address. I slid into my Vette and made a U-turn so I wouldn't parade my Illinois license plates past Solly's window. I headed out of town.

Looking back, I'm not certain why I went to all that trouble. Perhaps a hint of the idea was already gnawing at my subconscious, but for some reason I could not have explained, I wanted that information. Now I realize it was my old nemesis fate at work.

As I approached Ashland, Oregon, I developed a great thirst, you know why, and found a comfortable bar. I sat over a couple of beers pondering the coincidence that placed me and Solly Greene within four feet of each other in Medford. The odds were beyond contemplation.

A man came into the bar and stood next to me to buy a six-pack. He had on an Exxon shirt, one of those grease repellent kind, with the name *Phil* stitched over one pocket. As soon as I noticed the name, something happened I will never be able to understand or explain. It was metaphysical, if that is the correct term, and surely awesome. The name Phil reminded me of Phil Falco, and instantly a plan, a beautiful, wondrous plan, complex yet simple, erupted fully formed in my mind. It didn't tease, coax, or tickle. One minute I was somewhat bored, the next my hands were shaking. I was beyond excited as I explored the scheme move by move, step by step. Perfect, flawless, not a blemish. The least I could come out with was one or two hundred thousand dollars. I could extend my vacation for a year and go someplace like the Canary Islands, where a person with that much cash could live like a savings and loan president.

I dropped some money on the bar and hurried out to the Vette, aiming it for Phoenix. I drove nonstop through Kingman and turned south on Highway 93 to cut the angle to the Valley of the Sun. I was in a hurry.

The Phil Falco I remembered was from Chicago, a former preferred customer who in some fashion stepped on important toes and had been exiled to Scottsdale, Arizona, to look after a business interest for one of the infamous thirty-seven, a man now residing in Sandstone federal slam.

Falco was ideal for my purposes. I knew of him because of legal documentation I had prepared, and he didn't know me at all. I could sell Solly Greene through him, take my extended vacation, then return to Chicago and never see him again. Yes indeed, Falco was my man.

Dean Farine came to mind. Dean was a battle-scarred old trial attorney I met early in my career. He had gazed at me with those opaque lawyer's eyes that had seen everything and revealed nothing and said, "Son, very soon you will learn that the only morality centers around pictures of dead presidents, and the more recently they became deceased the more moral they are. Case closed." I had always liked old Dean.

The business in Scottsdale that Phil Falco supposedly owned but in reality only managed was a bar and restaurant called The Sporting Life. The name was appropriate because it was also home to the largest bookmaking operation in Ari-

zona, but considering the ownership, what else was new?

I walked in during happy hour to find wall to wall guzzlers and guzzlettes. The young bartender was wearing a red vest and bola tie over a T-shirt bulging with muscles. He obviously worked out and doubled as bouncer if any of the happy hour bargain hunters got on the outside of too many well drinks. When I asked him if Phil Falco was in, he wanted to know who wanted to know.

I tried the magic word. "Tell him someone from Chicago is here to see him."

The bartender spoke briefly into a telephone on the backbar, and in half a minute a man came out of a back room. He was medium tall and husky, with slicked-back black hair and the face of an ex-boxer with a mediocre record. The bartender nodded at me.

"You wanted to see me?"

I had decided on a bold, confident approach. "Too many ears in here, Phil. Sometimes even the walls. Let's go outside."

Falco hesitated, stared at me, shrugged, and headed for the door. I followed him out to the sidewalk, where he said, "Who sent you?"

"Nobody. All I want is five minutes of your time and I will make you a hero, the biggest

man in the country among your friends."

"How do you know who my friends are? And what makes you think I want to be a hero?"

"Everybody wants to be a hero, but most of us never get the opportunity. This is yours." I spotted an ice cream parlor a few doors away with tables outside. I pointed. "Come on, let's sit. What have you got to lose but five minutes?"

Falco considered briefly, shrugged again, and this time followed me to a table. A waitress materialized, and Falco ordered root beer floats. If the boys in Chicago could see him now. He waited until we had our treats and the waitress left.

"I'll tell you the truth, Phil, I'm not from Chicago," I lied. "But I'm going to make an offer you and your friends can't refuse. You will be such a big man they will probably let you go back to Chicago."

"You know a lot about me, and I don't like that. And I don't want to go back to Chicago. Do you know what the weather is like back there in the winter?"

"Doesn't it get really hot here in the summer?"

"You never have to shovel the heat."

He had a point.

"I'm busy. What are you selling?"

"People."

"People? How much are people selling for a pound these days?"

"Not by the pound, on the hoof. And very special people. Informers. All across this country of ours there are former informers who have been hidden away by the government. They have new identities, new lives. They are part of the Federal Witness Protection Program."

"I know. We call that the Rat Hole."

"Good name. And there are other people, some of them your personal friends, who would like to locate those informers to chastise them for having big mouths and no loyalty. I assume you know that, too."

Falco finished his float and made a long gurgling noise with his straw. The man was a class act.

"Right, you know. Now suppose someone, namely me, had a friend working with the Federal Witness Protection Program in Washington. And suppose that friend was willing to provide information to your friends, the new names and addresses of their former associates. And further suppose the opening offer was to provide a sample with no money down, just to show good faith and also how reliable our information will be."

"No front money?"

"Payment upon satisfaction."

"I think there would definitely be some interest in a deal like that. What happens?"

"Phil, who do you think is the one person your friends would most like to locate? Number one on their hit parade, pardon the pun."

"There have been so many."

"Come on, Phil, think. Does the name Solly Greene stir your memory?"

At the mention of the name Falco's face went taut, his jaw muscles rippled, then he relaxed and grinned a thin-lipped, wolfish grin, nodding knowingly. "Solly the Singer. The biggest rat in the Rat Hole."

"He is that. Here's my proposition. The going rate on Solly is one million dollars. Our price is two hundred thousand, which is a bargain because when we locate Solly for your friends they can use the hired help for the hit for a twentieth of that amount."

"You seem to know a lot about things that are none of your business."

I had no good answer to that, so I didn't try. "So, you get agreement to our price. You give me the go-ahead, and we will supply you with Solly's new name, address, location. On faith. We will trust you be-

cause we want to do a lot of business with you once you know our information is genuine. Okay, you send someone who can be very circumspect, ah, that means careful, to verify the information. But, and this is a huge but, you don't touch Solly, not yet. Simply check, and if your friends are satisfied, we get our money. Then I will outline the rest of the proposition. Remember; Solly is left in place for now. If he's hit, the deal is over. We take our cash, and your friends miss a golden opportunity to settle a lot of old scores and at the same time deliver a powerful message to the future. You understand? Because if Solly is hit too soon, the government will get nervous, and my friend will have to cool that end. Simply take a look at Solly, pay us, and hear the rest of the deal, then decide yes or no. If it's no, we disappear, and you do Solly. If it's yes, we do some business, and then you eliminate a lot of rats all at once, including Solly. A very effective message, and what's a week more or less?"

"I'll pass the word. How do I get in touch with you?"

"I'll be sitting right here tomorrow, same time. I'll be the one behind the root beer float."

"What's your end in all this?"

"Twenty percent middleman cut."

"You got a name?"

"Everybody has a name."

He waited, then got the idea. He understood. "I know you want cash. Big bills, small bills?"

"Spendable bills."

The next evening went quickly. Falco's people agreed to the deal but cut the dollar amount in half. One hundred thousand. I half expected that and went along.

"Noon tomorrow," I said. "I'll bring the information. And could we have something besides root beer floats? They give me gas. Do they give you gas?"

Falco looked down at his stomach, patting it. "I got a problem. Everything gives me gas and indigestion."

If the plan went my way, he didn't know what indigestion was yet. I took a long way back to the Vette, which I was parking two blocks away.

The following day at noon I was more nervous than I had thought I would be. I gave Falco the information on Solly Greene with a whole bunch of trepidation. If the boys got impatient, my plan was down the drain, not to mention my sanity.

Falco said, "Medford, Oregon? Somebody flew in last night who knows Solly the

Singer. What's the closest airport to this burg?"

"Portland, Frisco, take your pick. Not a long drive from either one. How long to check it out?"

"Three days."

"Fine. I'll be back Tuesday at noon. Have the money."

"If everything checks out, you got it."

"And don't hit Solly yet."

"All right, all right. We understand."

I drove to San Diego for two days, and at noon on Tuesday I was back at the ice cream parlor. By now I was a semi-regular, so the waitress gave me a cute smile. "Hi. Root beer float?"

I made a face. "Have mercy. A chocolate sundae, no nuts."

I had started on my ice cream when Falco came out of the bar and walked over. He sat down and slid a Thom McAn shoebox secured with a yellow rubber band over to me.

"You give good information," he said with what passed for a smile. He probably looked the same when he had indigestion.

I wiggled the rubber band off the box and peeked inside, counting. There were ten packets of one hundred dollar bills each held with a smaller yellow band. The money didn't come close to filling the box. "I

thought it would be more bulky. You could get three times that much in this box."

"I know. We do it all the time. So let's hear your deal. I got people waiting to hear from me."

I placed the shoebox in my lap. "It's simple. You and your friends contact everybody you know who might want to locate informers. Make one list and my friend doesn't care how long. Twenty thousand per name, firm."

"That could be serious money."

"This is serious business. You didn't hit Solly, right?"

"Jeez, no, we did not hit Solly."

"Excellent. Now I'm going to give you a crash course in computer access." Falco's expression conveyed the idea he would rather be doing something else. Anything else. "I know, but it's necessary that you understand. Okay, the files my friend has to look at are priority files, top secret, so not just anyone may look at them. In order for my friend to go into those files, she has to give the computer her access code, which is like a password that tells the computer she has the right to look."

"Your friend is a woman?"

That was news to me, so I waved it off. "Whatever. Now,

each time she does that, the computer records it, and once a week they print out what files were opened and who looked at them, to make certain whoever did had a good reason. You follow so far?"

Falco nodded.

"So, if she did one or two names and you hit those people, plus Solly Greene, the feds would know there was a leak. They check the computer to see who has been in those particular files and soon my friend is a permanent guest at Alderson."

"Can she beat the system?"

"One way only. I call and give her the entire list of names. She goes into the computer late one afternoon and gets the info on all the rodents on your list at the same time. Meanwhile, I take half the money and fly to Washington. I meet her the evening she does the deed, trade her half of the money for the information, and she heads out of the country to a place that has no extradition treaty with the U.S.: Brazil, Costa Rica, who knows? I come back and stay with you while you check out the information. When you're satisfied, you give me the other half of the cash, and I go away to wait to hear from my friend because right now I don't know where she's planning to hide. When I hear, I take her the rest of the money

less my twenty percent and everybody is happy, except maybe Solly Greene and the people on your list. And if you're smart you will hit everybody on the same day. Don't give the feds time to regroup."

Falco looked disappointed. "I don't think so."

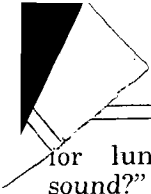
"Why?" I already knew the answer.

"We're talking thirty, forty names. Six or eight hundred thousand dollars. My friends would not care to have you go off with half of that much cash, especially their cash, without some insurance, like for instance a couple of bodyguards, to see that no bad guys take the money from you and that you come back. Oh yes, I'm sure my friends would insist on that."

Oh well, what the hell. It was worth a try, and what I had already scored would still give me a fabulous vacation extension. And it gave me the extra days I had to have. To Falco I said, "I agree to that. Two escorts it is. How long will it take you to compile the list?"

"Three days."

"Make it four. I'll be here Saturday. I call my friend Sunday and fly to D.C. Monday morning, with your bookends. Monday afternoon my friend works her magic, Monday night we trade and the three stooges are back here Tuesday



for lunch. How does that sound?"

Falco stood up, hitched his slacks, and stared down at me. "Sounds fine when you say it. Let's see how it goes."

I tried to look hurt. "You have doubts?"

"With that much cash involved, we always wait and see. And send bodyguards."

I stopped at a bank and bought a roll of quarters, then checked out of my motel. I picked up I-17 heading north for Flagstaff and Route 40. Just north of Phoenix I pulled off the highway at Black Canyon City and found a public telephone. It took a call to directory assistance, three toll calls, and most of my quarters to deliver my message. It is next to impossible to convince typically egotistical bureaucrats of anything that smacks of fallibility in their department. Well, at least I had bought them four days.

As I said, I had always liked old Dean Farine and more or less agreed with him about morality and dead presidents. A person's life, however, was a whole other ball game, and I had never intended to let Solly Greene be killed.

It took me nine days to drive back to Chicago, including a four-day encore performance with that divorcee from the

suburb of Albuquerque and a Cubs/Cardinals game in St. Louis. I got back to the city in the early afternoon and drove to my downtown bank where I rented a safe deposit box and cached my shoebox. As I left the bank, I came face to face with Mel Cunningham, one of the specialists from the law firm. I had always been friends with Mel and gave him a big smile. He looked at me like I had just tested positive for something disgusting. As my smile melted, he grabbed my arm and dragged me away from the bank. I planted my feet and jerked my arm away.

"What's wrong, Mel? Was it something I said?"

"Shut up and come with me," he whispered in my ear. That was the first time anyone had whispered to me on the middle of the crowded sidewalk on Madison Street in downtown Chicago, so I considered the possibility that he was serious. I allowed him to steer me into a nearby bar and a booth near the rear. He bartered for two beers and brought them to the booth, sat down, opened his mouth to speak, looked around, and moved closer. He was acting strange, even for a lawyer.

"What are you doing here?"

I had that one covered. "I live here."

"And you must also be suicidal."

I swigged some beer. "You aren't going to preach about my smoking again, are you?"

Mel squeezed my arm. "I'm serious. No more jokes."

I swigged some more beer. "Right, serious. What the hell are you talking about?"

"There's a contract out on you."

I swigged some more beer. It tasted coppery. I suddenly felt like a member of the Polar Bear Club. "Who?" was all I could croak.

"Who do you think? The people you took for two hundred large."

"Two?" I groaned. "Falco, you dishonest . . ."

"I had a meeting with some people just this morning, and they are very upset with you."

"How do they know who I am? I never told them. I parked my car blocks away, and nobody followed me. I made sure."

"Nobody who looked like Jake LaMotta followed you. How about a fifteen-year-old girl wearing a Catholic school uniform?"

"I wouldn't have noticed that."

"Falco's daughter. She got your license plate number the second time you showed up. Falco called it in here, and two hours later they had your name

and address, plus your picture off your driver's license. They want to know who they're dealing with. Otherwise you have something on them and might get cute. They want to be in a position to get cuter."

"And they figured out everything?" My voice was raspy, and I hoped I wouldn't sob.

"They're not all cretins. Some of them are quite intelligent, and a few of the young ones have degrees. They also claim you tried to take them for even more than the two hundred thou. Some story about a friend?"

I hung my head. "It was a good story. I had to give it a shot."

"And now they're going to give you a shot, most likely in the head. Like I said, they know what you did to them with Solly Greene; took their money, convinced them to wait, then tipped off Washington. When they realized you weren't coming back, they shot a pair of hitters up to see Solly, and guess what? Solly didn't live there any more. Surprise, surprise."

"What do I do now?"

"What else? Disappear. I assume you haven't been home."

"Why?"

"Some disagreeable people are watching your apartment.

They know everything you own is there."

I suddenly recalled my last trip home. "Good Lord, when I came home to pick up my car, I left my passport in the apartment."

"Then forget it. Go away and lose yourself. Those people never forget or forgive. I won't tell anybody I saw you."

I retrieved my shoebox, took my forty-eight thousand in a cashier's check, and drove out to North Cicero Avenue, which is lined with automobile dealers. A whitehaired man with the face of an archbishop and the soul of Jesse James made an offer for my Corvette without taking me to dinner or telling me he loved me. Not having any options, I took the cash, walked two blocks up the street, and bought a three-year-old Buick, beige and innocuous. As I drove out of the city, I had about one hundred and sixty thousand dollars' operating capital. I had decided to head east where I could more readily hide among the densest population in the country, but as I drove across the top of Indiana, I realized that east also had the greatest number of citizens who were somebody or other's preferred customers. In Michigan City I made a U-turn and headed west, skirting Chicago through the south sub-

urbs. I got on Route 40 and pounded the Buick nonstop to Albuquerque, where I was told the divorcee was on her seventh or eighth honeymoon, so I drove on to Gallup and holed up for three days, sleeping, eating, drinking, and trying to plan whatever future I had left.

I was in waste matter up to my ears. The only place I could sell my skills was in a large or medium-sized city, and that was not safe, plus I would have to offer references in my correct name. A small town would be safer, but what would I do there? I didn't know anything but the law. I had enough money to start a small business, but most small towns already had one or two of everything.

In the end I could think of only one solution to my quandary, so I came here, which is, I hope, the last place certain people will look for me.

Medford, Oregon, is a nice little town, population 45,900, the county seat. I bought a franchise copy shop from a local broker. I'm not big, just two copiers and an offset press. I don't even do graphics, but I'm considering expanding into that and some other things because right now I am just barely eking out a most meager living and supplementing it out of the hundred thousand I have

left after purchasing the business. I calculate that at the rate of ten thousand dollars a year, in ten years I will be reduced to living on what I earn in the store. Yes, I will expand soon.

I live in an efficiency apartment over Hager's Bakery. The entire apartment is the size of my living room back in Chicago, but at least it smells good, especially on Tuesdays and Saturdays when Pamela Hager bakes cinnamon raisin sweet rolls. Small pleasures are important to me now.

And so I will spend my remaining days here, however many that may be, until fate decides to maneuver someone

who knows me into stopping for whatever reason, and that person spots me. It's bound to happen. That is the nature of fate.

Meanwhile, I try to be careful. When I walk outside near the shop, I circle the block, never walking past that hamburger stand or the gas station. I won't drive down the main drag unless absolutely necessary. I mean to give fate a run for its whimsy.

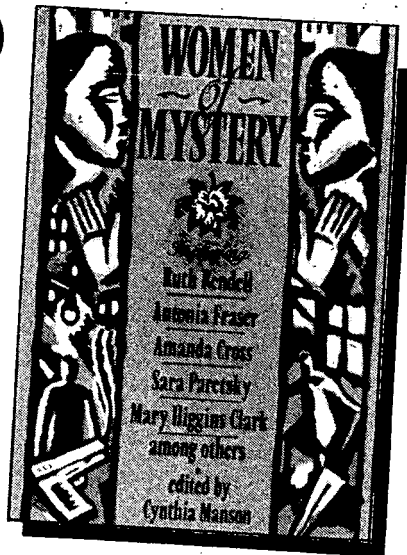
Who am I kidding?

No matter what I do, when fate wants me, fate will get me.

When Armageddon rolls around, fate will retire as the undisputed, undefeated heavyweight champion.

Smirking and snickering.

TOP WHODUNITS BY THE TOP WOMEN IN THE FIELD



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In the Pink

by Linda Evans

They were arguing again when I came down to fix breakfast. Uncle Earl's face was the color of strawberry jam, and Aunt Belle was gasping like she'd just finished running the Boston Marathon. You'd think they'd have the good grace to die off from old age and high blood pressure and stop making my life miserable. But they'd gone on like this for years, and it looked like they'd keep on long past the time I finally gave up and left. Or died on the job.

"Maxine, come rub my back," Aunt Belle ordered as soon as she saw me. "Earl has me all tense and upset."

"Don't listen to her, Maxine. She started the whole argument—as usual. Pour your uncle some coffee before you fry up the eggs."

I staggered backwards and held up both hands like a cop trying to stop traffic. "Please. I can only do one thing at a time. First I'll get Uncle Earl's coffee. Then I'll fix breakfast. After that, I'll rub Aunt Belle's back."

"Before you do the dishes," Aunt Belle broke in.

Uncle Earl pasted on an expression of victory, since he was first this time, and Aunt Belle shot him a look that would have shriveled an oak tree. I sighed and trudged over to the stove to begin yet another day of slavery at Greenpines.

It had seemed like such a great deal when my aunt and uncle offered me a place to stay in exchange for doing a "few" chores. Anyway, at the time, I didn't have a whole lot of other choices.

"And, after all, honey, we never had any children of our own. We got to leave all our money and this place to somebody," Uncle Earl had said, with a chuckle and an affectionate pat on my bottom.

I could hardly control my excitement when Bubba Howard, their lawyer, came out and drew up a new will the day I moved into my room at Greenpines. I'd inherit a fortune when my aunt and uncle died.

How was I to know they'd offered the same deal to each of my many cousins in years past? It wasn't my fault I'd left Fort Wilson

right out of high school and lost touch with my roots until last year when I'd drifted back after my fourth divorce.

All of my cousins had tried and failed to meet Aunt Belle's and Uncle Earl's demands. Each in turn had been written out of the will in favor of the next niece or nephew on the slave list. I was the last of a long line. Maybe they planned to start over at the head of the list when I failed. My cousin Orville was just dumb enough to try again. He was the only one of us cousins who hadn't died on the job or quit voluntarily. Uncle Earl and Aunt Belle had thrown him out for denting their Cadillac when he backed into an Angus bull that was loose in the parking lot at the supermarket.

One thing was sure. I'd about given up. My aunt and uncle were in the pink of health as Uncle Earl told me about six hundred times a week. They were both from generations of centenarians and were well up in their eighties now. I, however, middle-aged and prone to allergies, dragged around like a worn out cart horse.

After I finished rubbing Aunt Belle's back, I still didn't get to do the dishes. I imagined the egg yolk hardening on the plates so I'd need a chisel to work it loose, but Aunt Belle wasn't through with me yet.

"Honey, go get the tweezers and pluck the long hairs out of my chin. Mercy sake, I look like an old catfish."

Aunt Belle settled her pale, slug-shaped body back in her chair and waited for me to comply. I didn't argue. I'd been bought and paid for with expectations.

It took me all morning to finish dewhiskering Aunt Belle and doing my other chores. And that was only the inside work. Just as I finished washing Aunt Belle's frizzy white hair with homemade egg yolk shampoo—and guess who homemade it—Uncle Earl strode into the bedroom with a master list of outdoor work that included fertilizing the citrus trees and burying a dead calf.

"First I have to go into town for groceries. And I have to stop at the hardware store for gardening stuff," I said, handing the list back to Uncle Earl.

"This time *you'll* have to wait, Earl," Aunt Belle said smugly.

"The girl would have time for her farm work if you didn't keep her so danged busy helping you primp," Uncle Earl burst out.

They were at it again. I took off in their twenty-year-old Cadillac before they could turn their attention back to me with a thousand new orders. Usually I took the farm truck to the hardware store,

but today I drove the car, since I hadn't finished tuning up the truck.

I let the car coast down the long hill into town, not braking until I was almost up to the sharp curve at the end. Then I tapped the brakes and spun the wheel hard left, pulling into a parking lot when I saw there was no oncoming traffic. I'd decided to stop at cousin Orville's Hardware Store and Lawn Flamingo Outlet before I went for the groceries.

I parked the Cadillac all by itself behind the store as I'd been instructed. In sixty years of marriage, the Cadillac had been my aunt and uncle's one and only extravagance, and I knew they prized it. Just like Orville, I'd be cut out of the will in an instant if they found so much as a fingerprint on that car. They wouldn't, as long as I was around. I not only kept the car clean and polished, I kept the engine in good shape, a skill I'd picked up during a failed marriage to a mechanic.

Orville was wrapping up a family of plastic flamingos for a new retiree when I walked in. He wore a look of concentration on his usually blank face.

"You won't be sorry, ma'am," he was saying. "Package deal like this is a bargain. And they'll look real nice on your lawn in front of your trailer."

He looked up at my approach. "Oh, it's you, Maxine. How is life at Greenpines?"

He didn't even try to hold back a snicker. I glared at him. We'd been born the same year. For God knows what reason, Orville had spent his life in competition with me. I'd never really forgiven him for a teenhood prank that involved him sneaking up on me at the homecoming dance and snipping the straps on my gown right in front of all the overhormoned goons on our high school football team. It wouldn't have been so bad if I'd been able to hold the gown up without the benefit of the straps.

"None of your business, Orvy," I answered. "But I'll tell you anyway just to satisfy your nosy little mind. I'm doing fine. I intend to inherit every penny, so if you're thinking you can go back and try out for the inheritor role again now that Aunt and Uncle are a little older and feebler, you can forget it."

Orville snorted. He always does that when he can't think of a good comeback. He sounds just like a hungry hog barreling up to the feed trough.

"Work you to death," he said finally when I dumped my purchases on the counter.

"Not me. I can work rings around you. And I'm a lot smarter than you are, too. I'll have that place all fixed up and looking like brand new while you're still peddling lawn flamingos and birdbaths to the new Floridians at Chez Alligator Mobile Home Estates."

"We'll see. Well, say hello to Auntie and Uncle for me, Maxine." A smirk appeared on his fat, round face.

"Sure, Orville. You're probably one of their favorite people. Especially since that Angus-bull-meets-Cadillac incident."

I marched out to the car with my chin up. But I felt a lot glummer than I sounded. My shoulders ached already at the thought of digging the calf's grave. Uncle Earl talked like the animal was a newborn, but I happened to know it was half grown and had died of gluttony.

Uncle Earl was waiting on the porch when I got home. He sat in his rocker like part of the scenery while I lugged the groceries in all by myself and put them away.

"Sure is a nice day," he said, swiveling his head from side to side. "Good day for digging and for fertilizing the citrus, too."

I got the hint. "Don't worry, Uncle Earl. I haven't forgotten your list."

Uncle Earl chuckled. "Won't Belle be mad. She wanted you to read to her this afternoon while she soaks in the tub."

I'd almost rather bury the calf. Aunt Belle's eyes weren't so bad she couldn't read for herself. But she was so lazy it's a wonder she hadn't figured out a way for me to go to the bathroom for her.

Unfortunately, Aunt's tastes in literature ran to one-plot romances written about on a first grade level—"Date me, Cassandra. Date me." "Yes, Derek. Yes. Yes. Yes." It was enough to curdle my brain.

"Uncle Earl," I said suddenly. I snapped my jaws shut and stared at the porch boards. They needed painting, but it wasn't on my list yet and I wasn't about to volunteer.

"What is it? Speak up." Uncle Earl grinned expansively.

"I was just wondering. I mean, how come you and Aunt Belle stay together when you fight all the time?"

"Well, now, if we was to get divorced, it would cost a bundle. Neither of us wants that."

I should have known. Sometimes I thought my aunt and uncle spent all their waking moments trying to figure out how to have their money die with them. They'd been miserable with each other for sixty years, since the only thing they had in common was their stinginess.

The calf burial nearly finished me. By the time I hauled myself back inside to cook supper, I ached in every fiber. Blisters the size of quarters welled up on my palms even though I'd used gloves. If it weren't for my bragging to Orville that I'd outlast Uncle Earl and Aunt Belle, I'd have been packing my bags in defeat.

But I'd decided something during my long afternoon of gravedigging. You have to understand. I'm not a bad person or a criminal type or anything like that. The worst thing I ever did before was to set fire to all of Shad's stuff, including his collection of matchbook covers from topless bars. Shad was my third ex-husband, the one who ran off with a waitress from one of the topless bars. He deserved to have his stuff go up in flames.

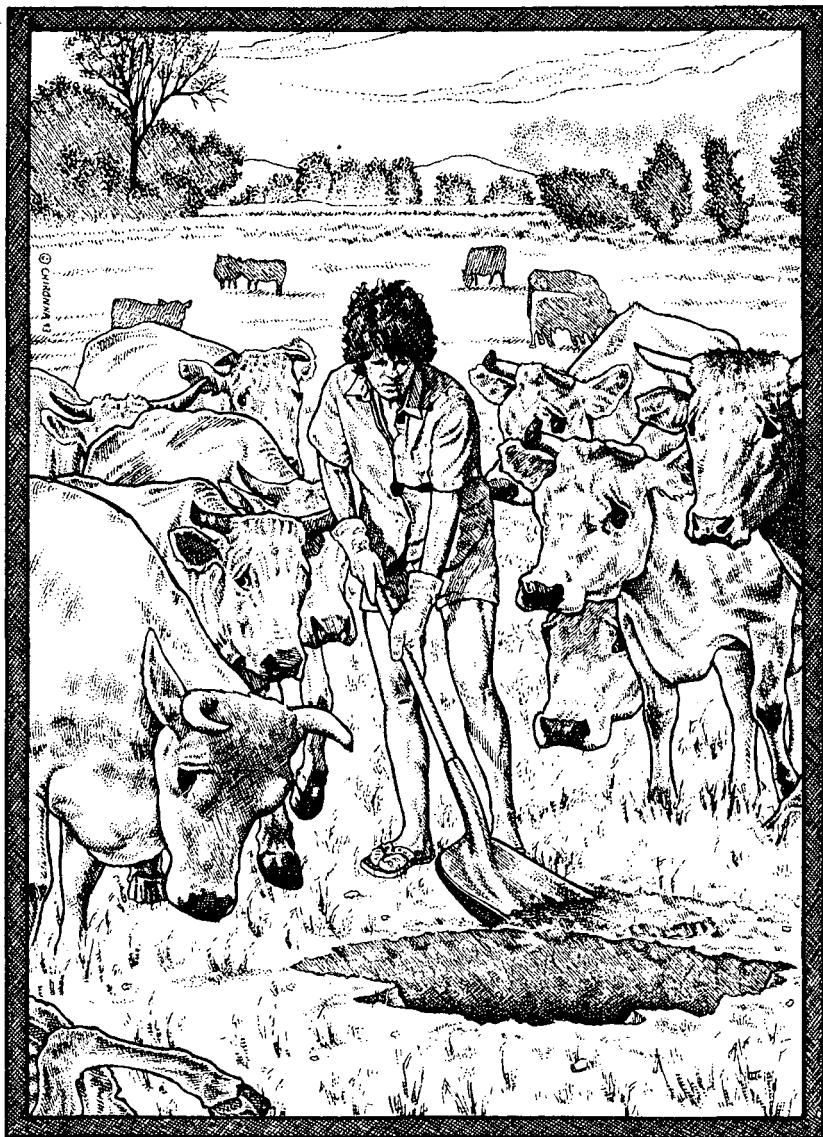
Still, I figured Orville was probably right about my aunt and uncle working me to death. After all, hadn't my cousin Cora died of a weak heart only a month after moving in at Greenpines? It could happen again. To me. Unless I did something about it. Maybe the hot sun addled my mind or something. Maybe it was having to drag that calf through half a mile of pasture with the rest of the herd trotting after me with unhappy expressions on their faces. Anyway, that afternoon I worked up the plan.

"At least I go outside and make sure Maxine is keeping up the yard and grove and the pasture work," Uncle Earl said to Aunt Belle during supper. "You ain't been outside in fifteen years. Not since Orville dented the Cadillac and you had to run out and see the damage for yourself."

"You stupid old coot. You know good and well I'm in poor health. Besides, the sun would burn me to a crisp."

I narrowed my eyes. True. Aunt Belle looked like something you'd find under a dark porch and then quick crawl back into daylight before whatever it was got slime on you. Her skin was whiter than milk, and her blue eyes had long since faded to a pale pinky-gray. She was the closest thing to an albino I'd ever seen. Still, I had to think of a way to get her outside for my plan to work.

Uncle Earl tapped his fork on his plate to get my attention. I looked up and blinked.



THAT AFTERNOON I WORKED UP THE PLAN.

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"Maxine, did you remember to pick up that grass seed while you was in town?"

"Yes. I stopped at Orville's. By the way, he said to tell you all hello."

"I ain't saying hello back," Aunt Belle said. "He about ruint the Cadillac at the supermarket that time. Running that flamingo outlet is more suited for Orville—tacky pink things that anybody can tell right off are nothing but fake."

"Tacky? Why, I was about to suggest that we get a herd of them for the front lawn," Uncle Earl said. His eyes glinted wickedly.

"Earl McDowell, I'll kill you first."

Aunt Belle's face turned as red as it ever gets, which is about the color of a boiled shrimp. "I'll put you in your grave and then stomp you down with both feet before I let you bring a single plastic flamingo onto this property."

Just like that, the final pieces of my plan fell into place. I had to hide my face so they wouldn't see me grinning. Tired as I was, I went out to the garage right after I got done with the supper dishes. I finished the tuneup on the truck and turned my attention to the Cadillac.

In the morning Uncle Earl carried a chair out to the grove so he could supervise my work. I noticed that he sat in the shade.

I waited till he looked good and comfortable before I said, "Uncle Earl, I sure am feeling poorly today."

"Work slower. You should be able to get done if you pace yourself, Maxine."

"Yeah, these bags of fertilizer don't weigh more than fifty pounds apiece."

"That's right, Maxine."

"Just one thing. I forgot to tell you. We only have enough fertilizer for half the grove." Not true, but Uncle Earl didn't know that.

"Damn. I wanted it finished today."

"Why don't you take the truck in and pick up a few more sacks at Orville's? That way I can keep on working while you're gone."

"I expect that would be best."

Uncle Earl's face was creased with reluctance at actually having to do a chore for himself, but I knew how anxious he was to get the grove taken care of.

I waited till he was out of sight down the highway before I dragged myself into the house with my hand over my heart. As

soon as I saw Aunt Belle, I started gasping and carrying on like I was suffering through a major allergy attack.

"Aunt Belle," I wheezed, "I thought I'd better tell you right away."

"Tell me what, Maxine?" Aunt Belle had been waiting patiently next to a bottle of hand lotion for me to get done in the grove and then lotion her hands softer for her.

"Uncle Earl. I don't know what's got into him. He says he's going to plant those lawn flamingos—right out front by the road so everybody in town can see them."

"He's as good as dead!"

Aunt Belle struggled to her feet like a whale that just strapped on legs to try walking on dry land. "Where is that fool?"

I wheezed and let out a few fake coughs. "You're too late. He's already left for Orville's store."

"Don't just stand there, Maxine. Go after him!"

"I can't," I moaned. "If I don't take an allergy pill, I'm liable to keel over. Then after I take the pill I can't drive. It says so right on the bottle. You'll have to take the Cadillac and go after him, Aunt Belle."

"I ain't driven in years." Aunt Belle waved her clenched fists. Her albino eyes flashed scarlet. "I'll make him take those things right back soon as he gets home."

"All sales are final," I said, shaking my head in mock sadness. "You know Orville wouldn't give you all a break. What a waste of money."

I knew that would get her. She snatched the Cadillac keys off the kitchen table and waddled out to the garage.

I went ahead and took my allergy pill while I waited for part one of my plan to work. I wasn't really having an attack, but I might need an alibi if one of the people from the sheriff's department got smart enough to check out my story after the accident. I lay down on the musty old quilt Aunt Belle had given me for my sagging bed, and as I drifted off, I thought of the suicide I planned for Uncle Earl when the fuss over Aunt Belle died down.

Only thing is, I didn't need part two of my plan, as it turned out. A solemn Bubba Howard told me the whole story later when he came over to give me the news in person. First I told him my rehearsed version about how Aunt Belle had flown into a rage and sworn to kill Uncle Earl in an argument about money.

"I was having an allergy attack and took my pill. I must have been asleep when she left, Bubba."

"Your uncle was already at Orville's store when your aunt came flying down the highway in that big Cadillac. She took the curve at the bottom on two wheels and then plowed into the front of the store right where Earl was standing. It was all over in just a second for both of them."

"Was anyone else hurt?" I asked. I hadn't planned Aunt Belle's accident to go exactly that way, but since the Cadillac had caught fire and burned, no one could check out the brakes. I suppose I miscalculated a little when I punched that hole in the brake line. She had just enough brakes to make the turn, which I hadn't planned on, but not enough to keep from slamming into the store.

"No. Orville was out back directing a flamingo truck up to the loading dock. The store was empty except for Earl. But then when you figure that Orville's store burnt to the ground and it wasn't insured, I guess you could say that Orville was hurt, too." Bubba drummed his fingers on Uncle Earl's—I mean, on *my* antique desk. "All he has left is the truckload of flamingos that was being delivered at the time of the accident. The factory wouldn't take them back."

"Don't worry," I said. "I intend to do something for Orville."

"That sure is sweet of you, Maxine. Especially after that incident of the, uh, homecoming gown."

Bubba Howard had been captain of the football team that year.

I giggled girlishly and waved a hand at him. "Bubba, that happened a long time ago. Helping Orville is the least I can do."

I put on a pious expression as I thought about how sweet revenge had turned out to be.

"No, Orville. Put that one a little more to the right."

Orville uprooted the baby flamingo he'd just planted and moved it over next to the parents I'd selected, a pair standing in identical one-legged poses with their necks stretched out.

"Here, Maxine?"

"Yeah. How many more do you have?"

"About a hundred." Orville rubbed at the small of his back. His jug ears seemed to stick out more than usual in the fading light of late afternoon.

"Why don't you knock off for today. It's almost time for you to cook supper. You'll have plenty of time tomorrow to finish up after you're done in the grove."

"Sure thing, Maxine." Orville trotted obediently toward the house.

I leaned back in my porch rocker and sipped at the iced tea he'd made for me earlier. The three hundred or so flamingos already out on the lawn *did* look kind of tacky, but I'd promised Orville I'd buy them when he came to live here. After all, he's my cousin and I couldn't just let him sell flamingos from a roadside stand, could I? Besides, I figure I'll just put up a sign dedicating the lawn decorations to Aunt Belle, who made it all possible.

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Hunter and the Sanibel Trade

by D. L. Richardson

The thunderstorm had moved on, leaving clear skies. Typical Florida summer weather. In a final glory blaze, the sun fired the bottoms of the few remaining clouds.

Rising over the lighthouse end of the island, the moon had drifted out into the Gulf, showered the calm water with silver confetti light, and painted the sand with a pale colorwash. The stuff of romance novels and tearjerker movies.

And I was crouched in the deeper shadows of a small section of beachfront property left to its natural wildness. Whatever the scruffy little trees were, they grew thick and low. Standing was impossible unless you were under five feet tall. But no one could sneak up behind me, either. A fair trade.

I had been inhaling salt air laced with the strange mixture of life and death peculiar to the tropics, accustoming myself to the Sanibel night sounds until I was reasonably sure any anomaly would register.

I pressed a button on my watch. Eleven thirty. Half an

hour to go. Long past a six-year-old's bedtime. But tonight he would sleep in his own bed. Probably under the watchful eyes of his parents.

We were dealing with what I called professional "doers." Whatever you needed "doing," they were willing to do as long as your bank account was suitably impressive. Dealing with professionals had definite advantages, the chief one being they were dependable.

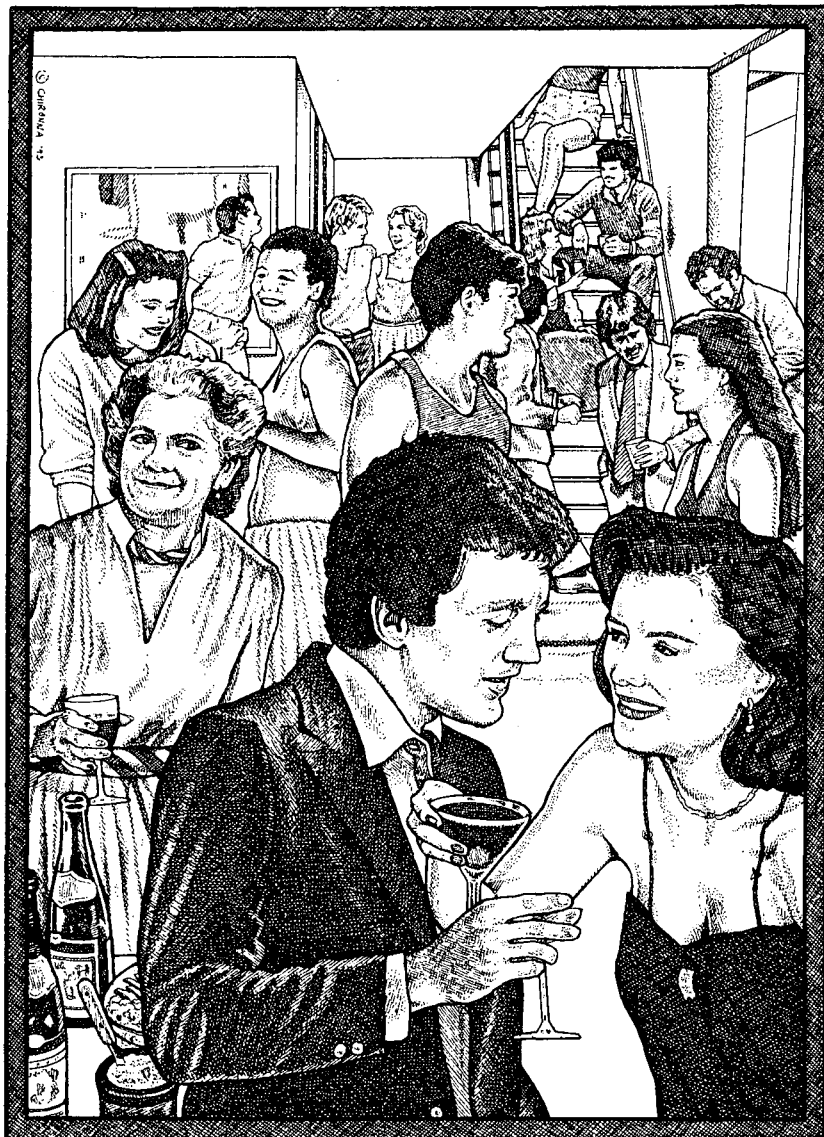
But if the exchange didn't go as agreed, they would leave with the boy and all bets were off.

Which was the disadvantage of working with professionals. Their contingency plans were simple, direct, and often fatal.

As far as I was concerned, the life of a small boy was more valuable than a few acres of land, no matter how ecologically rich, or any macho inclinations to outthink the bad guys and get the boy, the money, and La-brosh.

I shifted position carefully.

If I'd had time and my usual contacts, I would have followed up on our suspicions about La-



"WATCH OUT FOR MAISIE. WHEN IT COMES TO INTERROGATION, THE KGB HAS NOTHING ON HER."

brosh's background. As it was, I had to rely on two things—my instincts and Maisie Chipwell's gossip, which included the facts that no one knew exactly how Clarissa Labrosh's family had gotten its money and, as far as most discerning eyes could tell, Henry Labrosh's real estate acumen had not proved to be as astute and profitable as his lifestyle reflected.

For most people, that amounted to little more than a curiosity, something to speculate about over champagne and strawberries and cream. But for me, it was enough to paint a fairly definite picture of a professional criminal.

And then there was Tracey. My secretary's instincts have proved right so many times a prudent man would be foolish to ignore them. That was why she took me to the party—so Labrosh would know he wouldn't be dealing with an amateur or a parent too terrified to think straight. It would help ensure Ty's safety.

Smart lady, that Tracey.

She had left Lexington mad at me.

Which sounds worse than it was. My secretary's been mad at me before. Sometimes for two minutes. Sometimes for two days. And every year she makes at least one trip to her house on Sanibel Island.

So the one thing didn't have anything to do with the other. She'd spend her three weeks in the Florida sun and come back rested, refreshed, and expecting the apology she would figure she'd given me more than enough time to prepare.

That was why her summons via an abrupt message on the office answering machine one morning after she'd been gone only a week and a half came as a surprise.

"Hunter, get down here. Call Jan."

No hello, no this-is-Tyler, no you're-still-pondscum, no nothing. The woman definitely knew how to get my attention.

Travel agent Jan could only messenger over my plane ticket—nine forty the next morning, Lexington to Atlanta to Fort Myers—along with a note that I would be met at the airport and should plan to stay four or five days max.

So by the time I landed at one thirty the next day at the Regional Southwest Florida Airport, my curiosity had an itch Benadryl wouldn't have helped. I swear Tyler does that to me on purpose.

I don't know what I was expecting in the way of a meeter/greeter, but it wasn't the smiling eighteen-year-old with the ocean

blue eyes and the tousled mop of sun-bleached hair who stuck out a tanned hand.

"Adam Hunter? I'm David Wilkins. Tracey asked me to pick you up and get you back out to Sanibel." His grip was firm and callused. "Did you check any baggage?"

"This is it." I indicated the black carry-on.

"Great." He took the carry-on and left me to follow.

The pleasantness of the late July day surprised me. An energetic breeze rustled palm fronds, while overhead fluffy white clouds lazed across an intense sky. But the scent was unmistakably Florida. Sand and sun and salt and water and marsh.

Slipping on aviator-style sunglasses, David glanced skyward. "We might actually get by without a thunderstorm today. Hope you don't mind the Jeep." He stowed my bag in the back of the open-to-the-air vehicle. "My truck's in the shop. Tracey let me borrow this."

"Not at all." I fastened my seatbelt and donned my own sunglasses. Tracey Tyler owned a Jeep?

Tyler's a very private person, and I respect that. Consequently, there are a lot of things about her life B.H. (Before Hunter) that I don't know. Sanibel is part of that life, and

I was hoping the trip might give me some answers. At the moment, David Wilkins and the Jeep were just adding to the list of questions.

We maintained a steady stream of small talk as the Florida landscape whipped past. He asked about life as a private investigator and mystery writer. I answered his questions and asked a few tourist-type ones of my own. I couldn't help noticing the acres of timber that had been cleared and the marshy areas that had been filled to make way for self-service gas stations, shopping centers, and banks.

"Yeah," David said, "once they got the airport built, it didn't take them long to bring in the bulldozers. Used to be pretty wild out here, right up to the edges of the road."

It wasn't until we had gone through the toll booth at the start of the causeway connecting the mainland and Sanibel that I ventured a more inquiring question.

"Where's Tracey this afternoon?" I hoped it sounded casual. Or at least as casual as a shout can sound.

"At the bank, I think." The beginnings of a sly grin were evident. "What did you do that's got her so p.o.'d?"

"What did she tell you?"

The sun bejeweled the cobalt water of San Carlos Bay, an empty expanse to my left, island-dotted to my right.

"She didn't *tell* me anything. But the first four days she was here, she rode her bicycle out to Blind Pass. From the house, that's a round trip of better than twelve miles." He was grinning. "She only does that when she's mad."

We had crossed the first spit of white sand and were on the second bridge. A brown pelican wheeled across the bridge. Tyler had told me enough about Sanibel to give the trip across the causeway a strong sense of *déjà vu*.

"It's a long story, David. When you're older and have had more experience with women, I'll tell you about it and maybe you can help me figure it out."

He laughed. The second spit of land had fewer sunbathers and more fishermen. Trailing wake, a speedboat emerged from behind one of the small, uninhabited islands. The green treeline of Sanibel spread out in front of us.

"What do you know about my being here?" I asked, watching for his reaction.

His grip tightened on the steering wheel. "I overheard her tell someone you were the

only person she'd trust with it. I have no idea what 'it' is."

"Tracey's not in trouble?"

My voice must have held more anxiety than I thought, for he was quick to reply. "Oh no. It's one of her friends."

We were on the last bridge, the *ker-thunk, ker-thunk* of the seams in the concrete strangely hypnotic.

When David spoke again, his voice was tighter. "When I'm working around the house and the phone rings and I'm handy, I usually answer it. But Tracey told me to let her answer it, or if she's not there, to let the machine get it. The cordless phone is never out of her reach, and she doesn't stray far from the house. The business today must have been really important."

Once on Sanibel, David turned right onto shady Periwinkle Way. What he had been describing was not typical Tracey behavior. She came to Sanibel to get away from phones and clocks and appointments and fifty-five mile per hour speed limits.

Periwinkle T-boned into Tarpon Bay Road. We turned left, and Tarpon Bay T-boned at another three-way stop. Before we turned right onto West Gulf Drive, I had a glimpse straight ahead of the Gulf of Mexico. Sanibel was proving that life

without traffic lights and golden arches could and did exist. Quite nicely, thank you very much.

The motels, low condominiums, and small resorts on the left gave way to a residential section. Houses on the right were painted in whites or cool pastels, but on the left, the only indications of a residence were a mailbox and a narrow, sandy road disappearing into what looked like Florida's version of a thicket. David signaled and turned onto one of those roads. One side of the mailbox was painted with the words "Sea Whim."

The driveway shouldered a gentle S curve through jungle growth before spilling into a clearing with a tennis court on the left, a swimming pool on the right and, directly in front, a house that could have graced a cover of *Architectural Digest*. With siding that gave the appearance of weathered age, the house was all angles and planes and glass. Its harmony with the landscaping and the cobalt blue beyond of the Gulf was breathtaking.

Like many of the houses I had noted on the right-hand side of West Gulf, it was built on story-high pylons. David slid the Jeep under the house and hefted out my bag.

"I'll show you your room and you can get settled in." He started up the stairs that led to a narrow deck running the length of the front of the house. "Tracey said to tell you to help yourself to what's in the refrigerator. I cleaned the pool this morning. There's a plank walkway that leads to the beach. It's a good place to swim. No undertow. The water's really warm this time of year." He shifted my bag to his left hand and punched in a security code I was too distracted to catch. "I'll disengage the security system so you don't have to worry about getting locked out."

The foyer was appropriately cool and dim. A small fountain trickled water over rocks in one corner.

"The bedrooms are up here." David started up the stairs. "Tracey's given you a room with a view of the Gulf."

I found myself wondering how a young handyman came to have the run of Tracey's house and her security system. And I also wondered about the persistent sense that I had seen David before.

"This is it." He deposited my bag at the foot of the queen-size bed. "The bathroom's through there. Make yourself at home. Tracey said to tell you the two of you would be going to a party out on Captiva tonight." He

glanced at his diver's watch. "If you need anything, just give a yell. I'll be around a couple more hours." He started out of the room and then stopped. His boyishly handsome face was sober. "She probably won't tell you, at least not right away, but Tracey's glad you're here." As an afterthought he added, "So am I," and was gone.

After unpacking, changing into shorts and a T-shirt, and checking out the view from the small deck outside my room, I explored the rest of the house.

All the walls were white and all the carpet was a medium gray, but everything else was done in bright colors. I counted four bedrooms, each with its own bath, and up on a third level, all by itself, a sitting room/office with a spectacular view of the water. Downstairs was another small bedroom and bath, a TV room, a weight room, a half bath, a big kitchen with an eating area, and a large living and dining area with views of the pool and the ocean. Part of the deck that ran on two levels across the back length of the house had been screened in and was furnished with padded wicker furniture.

I raided the refrigerator and cabinets and left the kitchen with a glass of pineapple juice and a plate of cheese, crackers, and peanut butter. The blink-

ing light on the answering machine waylaid me. Etiquette pointed out it was none of my business. But I was starting to itch again, and the itch won out.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to resist," Tracey said. Then she sighed. "This is taking longer than it should. It may be four o'clock before I get home. The party's not until seven, and like everything else down here, it's informal. What do you think of Davey?"

I played the message twice more, concentrating on the nuances of her voice, unable to take my eyes from the framed photograph on the corner of the table. Tracey's smile was the replica of the one on the face of the blond man with his arm around her waist. Her late husband.

Retreating to the deck outside my bedroom, I moved the padded chaise to a shady corner.

I had always known Tracey had money, enough that she didn't need to work for me or anyone else. But the house, worth *many* American dollars, had taken me by surprise.

Then there was David and his relationship with Tracey—whatever that was—and the nagging feeling that I'd seen him before, even though I knew I hadn't. And my reason

for being here. And Tracey's voice on the answering machine. The sigh. The undercurrent of worry and fatigue. Something big was up. But still my mind kept going back to David.

I must have dozed off because voices woke me just a few minutes before the sun in my face would have.

"You and Jack drive carefully." It was Tracey, below me somewhere.

"We will," David answered. Farther away.

"And no beers after the game."

"Yes, Mother," David replied with sugary obeisance.

"And mind your manners, young man." Her voice was teasing.

David laughed his goodbye. With empty plate and glass in hand, I went downstairs and found her replaying her phone message to me. A little frown on her face, she touched the sterling frame of the photograph.

"That was a sneaky trick," I said.

The frown disappeared, but the light in her eyes when she smiled was not as bright as usual, and I didn't think it had anything to do with being mad at me.

"How were your flights?" she asked.

"Fine. How did your business go?"

Something flickered across her face. "Slow. Give me a few minutes to change, and we'll take a walk on the beach. We need to talk." She didn't give me time to answer.

I waited on the deck, thinking about how nice it was to see her, about the fatigue in her eyes and the halfhearted cheerfulness in her voice. I tried not to think about the photograph.

When she joined me, she had on pink shorts and a white cotton tank top. She had pulled a purple baseball-style cap with Sanibel Island written in turquoise on it over her short dark hair. I fought the urge to give her a big, it'll-be-all-right hug.

As we started down the railed boardwalk to the beach, she asked, "Did Davey tell you who he is?"

The curious nature of the question caught me off guard. "He introduced himself as David Wilkins. Being the astute observer that I am—" I was trying to keep my voice light "—I decided he does odd jobs for you. Either for spending money or college or both."

"He's David's son."

She said it without emotional fanfare, but it was still a jolt. And I suddenly realized why he seemed familiar. David Wilkins had the same easy smile,

the same tousled blond hair, the same twinkling eyes as Tracey's husband David, who had been killed in a plane crash before I ever knew her.

We stepped off the boardwalk onto the loose white sands and made our barefoot way to packed sand being licked by calm surf. Tracey headed us west. Occasionally a wave cooled our feet.

She spoke quietly and matter-of-factly. It was a slightly different version of a story I'd heard before. An unplanned teenage pregnancy. The girl had refused the marriage offer but had accepted financial help, turning it into what many people would have termed a "civilized arrangement." Father and son spent plenty of time together. The mother never tried to use the boy for emotional or financial blackmail. In fact, she was doing quite well on her own, selling real estate in Fort Myers. The boy, headed for college in the fall, had been provided for in his father's will.

"He spent summers with us," Tracey said.

The affection in her voice reminded me of David's obvious concern for her. "Is this about David?"

"No, but it could have been." She stopped and snatched a shell before the wave could take it back. "An auger." She

held it for me to see and then pocketed it. "When Davey was small, one of my David's friends had a child who was kidnapped and held for ransom. A couple of other wealthy families in southwest Florida had similar experiences." She took a deep breath and exhaled. "They caught the kidnappers, but the little boy was severely traumatized by the experience. It scared Davey and his parents. That's why Davey doesn't use the name Tyler even though David legally adopted him when he was ten."

"Someone else's child has been kidnapped," I said.

She nodded. The breeze cooled my sweaty face, and the water soothed my feet, but a hot anger began to simmer in my gut. No one had the right to use children as pawns. An ibis, its legs and beak a vivid red, eyed us with suspicion.

"You'll meet them tonight after the party. They haven't contacted any law enforcement agencies. They just want to pay the ransom. I convinced them to let someone else handle the exchange. They're both pretty wrecked by this."

"Do you want me to talk them into letting me find the boy?"

"I'll let you decide that after the party and after you've talked to them."

"What's the deal with the party, Tracey?" I wasn't accustomed to looking down into her eyes since, when she's in heels, she can practically look me straight in the eye. It made her seem somehow more vulnerable.

"Don't look at me as if I'm going to fall apart, Hunter."

I held up my hands in guilty surrender, and we headed back toward the house. A coed pair of joggers passed us, their bodies gleaming with sweat. Tiny stick figures peopled the horizon.

"The party tonight is being given by Clarissa and Henry Labrosh. Her family has money out the wazoo. He's into real estate. The local environmental groups have him at the top of their hate lists. I think he's behind the kidnapping."

I stopped. "Say what?"

"Close your mouth, Hunter. You'll look smarter."

I decided my uncool reaction was worth the genuine smile flirting with her mouth and eyes. I resumed walking. "Tyler, you know how I hate clients who don't tell me everything."

"It's complicated, Hunter, and I'm not sure I'm not simply reacting to my natural dislike of the man. Blake and Tere-salyn, the kidnapped boy's parents, don't know about my sus-

picious, and I'd just as soon they didn't. I'm afraid of what Blake might do."

"Water torture won't get it out of me." I paused a beat. "Bamboo shoots under the fingernails might."

She snickered. It wasn't the laugh I was playing for, but it was an improvement.

"I'm expecting a phone call before the party," she said. "It should straighten some things out one way or the other. I'll explain about Labrosh on the drive to Captiva. Fair enough?" We had reached the beach behind her house.

"You do this to me on purpose," I scowled.

She smiled up at me, that evil little Tracey smile, and then became more serious. "Do I really look as though I'm going to fall apart?"

I don't know where I found the willpower to keep from wrapping my arms around her. Or maybe I did know. Ghosts. "You just look like you could use a nap. Why don't you take one? I think I'll go for a swim." I gestured toward the Gulf.

She nodded and headed for the house. I pulled my T-shirt over my head. She turned.

"Don't go thinking this Mr. Sensitive routine is going to get you off the hook."

I had to grin as she walked away. In bits and pieces the Tyler I knew was coming back.

She yelled from the end of the boardwalk. "The security code is your birthday." Then she was gone, but not before I saw the grin on her face.

Every time I think I've got the woman figured out, she throws a knuckle curve right into the dirt.

“**A**dam, it's so nice to finally meet you!" Maisie Chipwell, her diamond jewelry flashing more brightly than a channel buoy on a moonless night, wouldn't release my hand. "Tracey, you slyboots, you didn't tell me he was so handsome." Maisie returned her attention to me. "How wonderful that you could get away for a few days, Adam, although Sanibel may seem a bit tame for someone of your profession. I won't monopolize you right now, dear, because I know everyone is dying to meet you, but we *must* chat." She gave my hand a motherly squeeze and left us with her jasmine scent.

I heard her exclaim that it had been simply *ages* since she'd seen Penny.

"We don't call her the fastest mouth in the South for nothing," Tyler said, steering me in another direction. "If you want to know what's going on with Sanibel and Captiva's well-

moneyed, Maisie is the one to ask."

"Where are our hosts?"

"Henry likes to make entrances, even at his own parties. They probably won't make an appearance for half an hour or so."

"Until then?"

"Mingle."

I smiled at a silk-clad woman regarding us with open curiosity. "Why do I feel as if I'm on display?"

"Paranoia. Just pretend you're at a book signing and do your charming mystery writer bit. But watch out for Maisie. When it comes to interrogation, the KGB has nothing on her."

It seemed an odd mixture of guests. From a young couple in their early twenties discussing the imminence of their wedding to Maisie and her cronies who were crowding sixty-five yet still holding sway. The rooms and deck were alive with conversation and laughter and color, none of it raucous, all of it quite civilized. A smiling young woman with a thirty-five millimeter camera moved around the guests, snapping candid shots, encouraging small groups to pose.

A few of the men wore light jackets, but for the most part, Florida casual meant open-necked shirts, sundresses, silk shirts, shorts, skirts, oversized

T-shirts, and leggings that bared half the calf. There was even a range of accents and practiced non-accents.

But they all had one thing in common—money. On their backs, around their necks and wrists, on their fingers, in the way they carried themselves.

And Tracey moved easily among them. I had seen her move just as easily among homeless families at the Salvation Army and among middle-class housewives at the health club adjacent to the office.

At some point we were separated, and Maisie cornered me at the buffet table. Twenty minutes later I was able to extricate myself graciously from her laughing inquisition and look for Tracey without appearing as if I was looking for her. She had been just the tiniest bit on edge since we'd walked in, as if she were anticipating something. Or, it suddenly occurred to me, looking for someone herself.

Through one of the large panes of glass that composed the back wall of the house I spotted her in a far corner of the deck talking to a blond man wearing beige slacks and a bright peach shirt. I could tell from the set of Tracey's bare shoulders that their conversation was more serious than a discussion of the unusual flavor

of the cocktail sauce sitting next to the boiled shrimp.

From the front, Tyler's black dress looked like a simple, sleeveless fitted dress with a skirt that flared softly just below the hips. But like Tyler, things aren't always what they appear. The dress had a low, squared-off neckline in back with sundress-type straps. Occasionally, sunlight spun off the dangling silver earrings.

"You must be Adam Hunter."

I turned to find a hand being thrust at me and instantly knew I was in the presence of my host, Henry Labrosh. He was about five seven and built like a bulldog. Prematurely gray and overly tanned, he might have been attractive had it not been for the nose that had been broken once too often and the pockmarks that spoke of untreated teenage acne. His black eyes had an alertness, a wariness that I had seen before—in the eyes of those a long time on the wrong side of the law.

I returned the handshake, which was actually a mini-test that short men who are bothered by their shortness often make of a handshake. "You must be Henry Labrosh."

The odor of cigarette smoke floated out from him. "I had

heard that you're a good private investigator."

From whom, I wondered. "You know what they say about believing everything you hear."

"You just have to know who to listen to." His chuckle sounded practiced. "Your presence has livened this bunch up. You can't believe the reaction of some of these people when they found out Tracey was working for a private investigator. They've been bubbling over with curiosity ever since, but she's been pretty close-mouthed about it. She hasn't even said what kind of investigating you do."

"Good secretaries who know how to keep business confidential are hard to come by."

Labrosh nodded. "That's true." His black eyes glittered. "Do you specialize in any particular area?"

I felt as though I'd been thrust into a fencing match. "Lexington is large enough for doctors to specialize, but not P.I.'s." I moved, careful to make it casual, so that in order to continue our conversation, Labrosh had to turn his back to the deck. "I've been admiring your home."

A showplace designed to impress, perhaps even awe, the house had a sleekness that

didn't coincide with normal living.

"Clarissa worked very closely with the architect and interior decorator. Many of the features are her idea." He surveyed the mingling guests and the buffet table. "Speaking of my wife, I seem to have misplaced her."

I inspected a free-form metal sculpture. The move was intended to draw him farther from the window. I couldn't decide if my caution was a genuine gut reaction or if it had been precipitated by Tracey's suspicions.

He continued. "I hear you've come down for a short holiday. A busman's holiday?" During the entire conversation, his eyes had belied the idle curiosity in his voice.

"Tracey's been telling me I need a vacation, so here I am. Thought I might try some deep sea fishing."

"I could arrange a private charter with a captain here on Captiva. He knows some special places he doesn't take regular tourists. What day would you like to go?"

My personal radar blipped like crazy. Enemy craft in the area. "Thanks for the offer, but I just arrived today and I haven't made any plans yet."

"Think about it and give me a call tomorrow." He made a

pretense of looking around the room. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd better find my wife and prove to her I'm being a good host and not off in a corner somewhere talking business. Maybe we'll get another chance to talk before you leave."

"Maybe."

I watched as he shook hands, kissed cheeks, patted shoulders. He worked a room as well as any politician. Then I let my eyes sweep the spot where I'd last seen Tyler. She wasn't there, but I did find her on the deck. When she spied me, she disengaged herself from the small group.

Slipping her arm through mine, she gave me a toothpaste smile. "Having a good time?"

"Peachy keen," I said, a smile plastered to my face so that only she could hear. "We need to talk. How about a walk on the beach?"

"Too obvious. I've got a better idea."

She steered me to a canvas pavilion in the back yard where a young man oversaw a first-rate stereo system. Several couples danced to the slow jazz sounds of Anita Baker. Neither of us said anything until I maneuvered us to the fringe of the other couples. Her bare back was warm under my hand.

"You met Henry." She said it without ceremony.

I figure that eventually her mind-reading act won't bother me so much. Maybe. "If you're so sure he's involved in this, I don't think it was a good idea for me to come."

"Why?"

"He asked me if I was on a busman's holiday. And he seemed determined to manage my social calendar."

"Did you let him?"

"What do you think?"

"Considering recent events, I'm not sure what to think." The words were as pointed as pitchfork tines.

"Maybe I should have worn sackcloth and ashes."

"Keep this up and it will be tar and feathers."

I kept my grin to myself, but I knew she wasn't mad at me any more. She did, however, deserve an apology. "I'm sorry, Trace. I should have trusted your judgment."

"It's not so much that you didn't trust my judgment, although that wasn't the smartest move you've ever made, but that you wouldn't even listen to me. And then in the next breath to accuse me of being jealous and spiteful." She shook her head.

"I didn't say spiteful."

"Okay, she's the one who said spiteful. But you didn't disagree. Adam, when a woman is trying to warn a man about an-

other woman, she does *not* want to be accused of ulterior motives. I thought you knew me better than that."

"I do know you better than that. And I am genuinely sorry. I would have told you before you left Lexington if I'd had the chance. Would it make you feel any better if I told you that I suspected the pretty Miss Devereaux was being less than truthful?"

"No. And it might have serious consequences for your health."

I laughed and hugged her closer, her perfume softly familiar, her cheek smooth against mine.

"When this is over," she said in my ear, "you owe me an expensive seafood dinner."

"It's a date." I returned her gentle hug and then pulled back so I could see her face. "Speaking of business, you seemed to be having a rather intense conversation a little while ago."

Her face sobered. "That was the phone call I didn't get before we left the house."

"Good news or bad news?"

"Depends on your perspective. But I don't want to discuss it here. Too many ears and eyes."

"Well then, Toots, what say we blow this pop stand?"

*

Blake and Teresalyn Stolte would have fitted right in with Lexington's young, upwardly prosperous crowd. Their home, backing onto a small lake, wasn't as large as the Labrosches' house, and it lacked the architectural verve of Tracey's, but it was roomy and new and out of the reach of many middle-class pocketbooks. Probably had a BMW and a Jeep Cherokee in the garage that occupied the ground level.

"May I keep this?" I indicated the snapshot of six-year-old Tyler Stolte, named for his godparents David and Tracey Tyler.

Teresalyn nodded, her eyes still red from the flood of tears that had spilled when she answered the door and saw Tracey. "That was taken earlier this summer. On the beach behind Tracey's house. Ty was so proud of himself." She was brutalizing a soggy tissue.

The boy, his head a mop of dark curls, beamed at the camera, a large starfish proudly held up for display. Ty Stolte had his mother's round face and dark hair, his father's chin, smile, and eyes. It was still too early to tell whether he'd inherited his father's height or his mother's petiteness.

"He's a cute kid," I said, meaning it, but also wanting to

get her away from past events and past tense verbs.

"He's a good boy." Teresalyn smiled tremulously. "I know all parents say that, but he really is."

"I'm still not sure we're doing the right thing." Blake Stolte had stalked the living room since my arrival.

"Blake," Tracey said gently, "we've been over this."

"No," he snapped. "You and my wife have been over it."

Teresalyn looked stricken. Then the tears started anew. Tracey squeezed her hand. Regardless of how capable Blake was in his everyday life, this was clearly out of his realm of experience, as it was most people's.

"Mr. Stolte, how much sleep have you had?" I asked.

His brown eyes narrowed. "What concern is that of yours?"

"He's had very little sleep," his wife said between sniffs.

"And you're angry," I added matter-of-factly.

"You're damn right I'm angry!" His fists were clenched at his sides.

"And understandably upset and worried."

He flung a hand at me. "Is that an example of your great investigative technique?"

I ignored the sneering remark. "Your emotional state

and your fatigue make a dangerous combination, Mr. Stolte." I was careful to keep my tone businesslike. "That combination leads to mistakes, and some mistakes are too costly to make."

"What makes you think the kidnappers will accept you?"

I could understand, even empathize with, his unwillingness to concede defeat so quickly.

"For exactly the same reason. They don't want any mistakes either. They just want their money."

"What if they don't see it that way?"

"I can convince them."

"Have you done this sort of thing before?"

"I've been in similar situations."

It wasn't what he wanted to hear.

"Similar situations! This is my child's life, for God's sake!"

Teresalyn began to sob.

I remained calm. "No, Mr. Stolte. There are three lives at stake here. Ty's, Teresalyn's, and yours. I can safeguard all three of you. Can you honestly say the same thing?"

As soon as we entered her foyer, Tracey tossed down her purse and keys and kicked off her sandals. "I need some air."

She disappeared into the living room, and one of the french doors opened and closed decisively. I picked her keys up from the floor and laid them beside her purse, my eyes once again unable to avoid the photograph of Tracey and her late husband. When I reached the french doors, she was striding down the boardwalk. First resetting the security system, I left my Weejuns on the deck and followed. I stopped at the end of the boardwalk to roll my slacks to mid-calf.

Tracey stood hugging herself where the waves crashed around her ankles. A three-quarter moon shone to my left on the lighthouse end of the island. Straight ahead, far out in the Gulf, lightning neoned the towers of thunderheads. With a deep breath and exhalation, I moved to stand about two feet to her left and behind her.

"Will that storm end up here?"

"Probably not," she said quietly. Then she stamped her foot in the surf and shouted. "I'm so damn mad, Hunter! I feel as though I can't breathe!"

"I know."

She studied me, her face in a frown, her fists clenched, her breathing more rapid than normal. Ordinarily, my secretary is a woman of great control, but I had witnessed other occa-

sional outbursts of temper that I suspected were the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

"Go ahead and scream." I held my arms out to the sides. "Or take a swing if it will make you feel better."

For a moment I thought she might take me up on it. Then she relaxed and put her hands on her hips. "You're impossible."

"So you've told me. On many occasions. Want to go for a walk?" I indicated the moonlit beach.

"I think I'd rather just sit and watch the storm."

"And tell me why you took me to Henry Labrosh's party."

"I of all people should have told you everything from the beginning." She settled where the packed sand turned to loose sand. "I'm sorry."

"What is this?" Our shoulders touched. "National Apology Week?"

She laughed. "I take it back."

"No exchanges, no refunds."

The distant bass of thunder pounded the air.

She sighed, and most of the rest of the tension left her body. "This gets pretty complicated. How much do you want to know?"

"Save the complications for the dinner I owe you. Give me what I need to get your godson back safely."

A smile touched her lips. "You'll like Ty. He's crazy about baseball and fishing." She rested her chin on her knees and was quiet for a moment, her thoughts with the boy. When she finally spoke, her voice was just loud enough to be heard over the storm-stirred surf and rumbles of throaty thunder. "Blake is a lawyer. Corporate law. For the last year and a half, he's been doing pro bono work for an environmental group. One of their major concerns is the protection of wetlands."

"I thought the federal government did that?"

"Yes and no. It's gotten a bit more complicated lately. The group's latest fight has been trying to stop the development of an area over in Fort Myers. Lawyers for the developers are contending that under the new federal guidelines it no longer qualifies as a wetland."

"Labrosh is one of the developers?"

She lifted her chin from her knees. "When I got down here and Blake and I talked, I suggested he run a check on the developers, find out who was involved. He didn't think it was important. After Ty was kidnapped, I decided to look into it myself."

"Why?"

She tilted her head. "It's the company I've been keeping. It's made me a suspicious wench."

I had to grin. "I apologized for that already. What's Labrosh's part in this development?"

"He stands to lose a lot of money if that area is declared a wetland. A lot of money." She paused for a moment. "And maybe the good graces of some powerful people." Her eyes met mine. "On both sides of the law, I suspect."

"What are the kidnappers demanding?"

"Five hundred thousand dollars."

"And?"

"That's it."

I thought for a moment. "If Labrosh is involved in this, it makes sense there would be some kind of pressure on Blake to drop the case or blow it."

She turned toward me and crossed her legs Indian fashion. "That would be too obvious. And there are two other lawyers working with Blake. They could take over." Her gaze was intense, even in the moonlight. "The hearing is tomorrow."

I thought about the distraught couple we had left alone in a childless house. About a mother able to vent her despair through tears and handwringing. About a father caught up in centuries-old soci-

etal expectations, unable to express a cancerous anguish. Consequently, Blake Stolte was in no condition to defend a nun against a perjury charge.

"Who knows about the kidnapping?" I asked.

"The four of us. As far as everyone else is concerned, Ty is visiting his grandparents in Sarasota."

"Any chance of getting a continuance?"

She shook her head. "The other side has already had three."

"What will Blake do?"

"Go to the hearing. Present his case."

"Can he win?"

"Even under optimum conditions, it was going to be too close to call."

And if Blake *were* able to muster the fortitude to fight the case as it should be fought, a brief, well-worded, well-timed note would be all that was necessary. "Hell of a coincidence in timing, wouldn't you say, Trace?"

"You don't believe in coincidence."

I contemplated the storm that didn't seem to be moving inland or lessening in intensity. My eyes on the backlit clouds, I said, "They won't call with the final instructions until after the hearing. That gives us

a few hours." Then I went back to thinking.

The call came late the next afternoon. A thunderstorm lashed rain against the windows. Blake Stolte had insisted I use the speakerphone—he wanted to know everything that was happening. I had reluctantly agreed, but only after issuing a harsh warning about what would happen if he interfered. His lower jaw had tightened into a near pout, but the situation was too serious to worry about whether or not he'd want to name his next child after me.

"Look," I said to the voice of the kidnapper, "you've had the boy for seventy-two hours. His parents have had almost no sleep during that time. Their nerves are shot. People that strung out make mistakes, and at this point, mistakes aren't good for anyone. For you, for the boy, for anyone."

"What's your stake in this?" A disembodied baritone Southern accent.

"I'm getting paid to do a job."

"Why have I never heard of you?"

"I guess *you* have an ad in the yellow pages. Kidnappers Are Us."

"You know what's at stake here." We might have been discussing stock options.

"If I don't get the boy, you don't get paid, I don't get paid. It's bad for business."

"I think we can wrap this up tonight."

"How do I know the boy's still alive?"

"He's alive."

"Why should I believe you?"

He laughed. "It's like you said. You don't get the boy, you don't get paid, I don't get paid. Bad for business."

To my right the sand whispered, bringing me abruptly back to the present. My hand went behind me to the Beretta that had belonged to Tracey's late husband. Ghosts were everywhere. A dark shape, bent low, slipped through the shadows.

"Everything's all set." David's voice wouldn't have carried the thirty-five or forty feet to the surf. "Tracey's still fuming."

"It'll give her something to do while she waits. Are you sure your friend can keep the Stoltes at home?"

Tracey and I had argued about who would be where when. I had wanted her to stay with the Stoltes for moral support and as a guard against any last-minute notions Blake might have of "helping" me. But she was having none of it.

My compromise hadn't made her much happier.

"They aren't going anywhere," David said. "Before I left, Jack and I removed a tire from their BMW and one from their Cherokee and put them in my truck."

Which was now parked, along with Tracey's Mercedes, in the garage of the empty house across the street at my back. Which was where Tracey was also. Waiting. Courtesy of a real estate friend who was sure Tracey had been arranging some sort of assignation.

A mosquito buzzed my face. The surf murmured and hissed. I let my eyes sweep the beach and attuned my ears to the hypnotic quiet.

Not thrilled with the proximity of the Everglades or Tracey's warning that there were areas just as wild within half an hour of Sanibel, I had negotiated with the kidnappers for the right to choose the place of exchange. Maybe they had been impressed that I already had a site chosen and could give them exact directions. I don't know. But they had conceded, exercising their option to choose the time.

David had helped me find a spot early in the day. About a mile from Tracey's house, a boardwalk designated as public beach access speared through

the native vegetation. The spot was sheltered from the view of the houses on either side and had three avenues of approach—Gulf Drive, the beach stretching to the left and right, and, straight ahead, the Gulf of Mexico.

Tracey hadn't been thrilled by David's offer to play a more active role in the night's events. But I needed help I could trust, and David had talked her into it.

When we were alone, Tracey had nailed me with her hazel eyes shooting jade fire. "Hunter—"

I had cut her off. "If he does exactly what I tell him, he won't be in any danger."

"I know that. It's later that I'm worried about."

I glanced to my immediate right. David was dressed as I had instructed. Dark clothes. Long sleeves. Long pants. A dark baseball cap pulled over his blond hair and down low on his forehead, shadowing his face. In this light, even someone who knew him wouldn't recognize him.

"Is this going to work?" he said suddenly.

"No reason it shouldn't."

"You and Tracey know who's responsible, don't you?"

"We have a fair idea."

"I'm not a child."

"I know that, and Tracey knows that. But I agree with her. The less you know the better."

"When I figure it out, I'll call you."

I grinned. "Better call me at home, or Tyler will have both our hides."

"She calls you Hunter, and you call her Tyler. Why?"

"Never gave it much thought." Which wasn't exactly true.

"I have my theories."

A new sound interrupted the stillness and my curiosity about his theory. A motor. To my right. Another sign of their professionalism. To have come from the left would have meant approaching under the full spotlight of the moon.

"There it is. Out in the Gulf." David pointed.

Running parallel to the beach, the rubber Zodiac skipped gently across the water. I reached for the flashlight lying in the sand beside me.

"Doesn't seem right." David's eyes never left the water. "To just let them walk away."

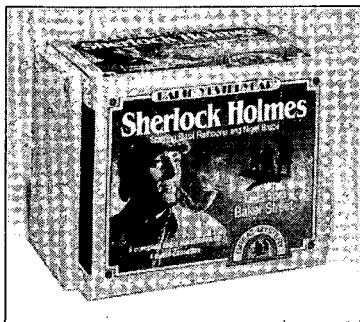
"Let's worry about getting Ty back first. We'll save 'right' for later. Don't make a move until I signal you."

"Yes, sir."

I gave his shoulder a strong pat and stepped into the moonlight. As I slogged through

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loose sand, the adrenaline began to pump. Once I reached the beach proper, I signaled the dinghy, which had already halved the power of its motor. An answer—three quick flashes—preceded the turning of the Zodiac's nose toward me.

I glanced left and right. Nothing either way. Tracey was watching the street-side access to the beach. David was keeping an eye on the beach itself. I wondered if one of the figures in the dinghy was surveying the scene with night glasses.

The motor cut out, and a figure splashed into waist-deep water to steady the craft. Another figure jumped into the surf, making far less noise than his predecessor, and waded toward me.

The Beretta was snug against my back. I had already shifted the flashlight to my left hand with my thumb against the power switch.

The water lapped the figure's knees, then his calves, then his ankles. He was dressed like a commando. All in black. Watch cap covering hair and forehead. Face streaked with black. Tomorrow I could walk past him on the beach and never know it.

He stopped ten feet from me. The holster on his right hip probably held a semiautomatic.

He was lean, but the way he carried himself spoke of muscled confidence. Not your average bargain-basement hood by any stretch of the imagination.

"Nice night for a walk on the beach." His smile helped define the mustache on his upper lip.

"Or for a boat ride."

"You have the money." The voice on the phone.

"If you have the boy."

Without turning, he raised his right hand over his head. His left hand stayed where it was, resting loosely against his belt. A left-hander who favored a cross-body draw. Labrosh had some kind of connections.

Another figure, this one with a humped back, dropped into the water. That left one more in the Zodiac. No doubt with a nightscope-equipped rifle. As the figure neared, the humped back became a clinging child.

I directed the flashlight over my left shoulder and flicked it on and off. The man carrying the child stopped ankle-deep in the water. He too was dressed in black.

"You didn't come alone," the man in front of me said.

"Neither did you."

He chuckled.

I felt David behind me.

"Perhaps you would like to check the merchandise," the leader offered.

I flicked the flashlight across the child's face, careful to keep the light out of the eyes of the man carrying him. Ty rubbed his eyes, the gesture of a sleepy child. I turned the flashlight off.

"Our turn," I said to David without turning my head.

David set the gym bag in front of the spokesman and then returned to stand behind me. Without any apparent qualms, the man squatted, unzipped the bag, and took his time examining the contents with a penlight.

One of the chores of the day had been to accompany Tracey to the bank for the cash. The Stoltes had had no way to raise the necessary cash, which was why they had turned to their child's godmother.

Another one of the chores had been convincing the bank manager that we knew what we were doing. Tracey had been politely adamant, and I had done my best impression of hired muscle. It helped me disguise how impressed I was by the fact that she had access to that kind of cash.

Finally, her patience at an end, she had leveled her gaze at the manager and said, "It's my money, Mr. Bonaventure. If I want to stand in the middle of MacGregor Boulevard and

hand it out, that's my business."

The man zipped the bag shut and straightened. He gestured to his partner, who waded out of the surf.

I signaled David to meet him at the water's edge. Wordlessly, David took the sleepy child and held him against his shoulder. Just as I had coached, he backed away, not turning around until he was behind me. Then he broke into a jog.

The man who had carried Ty took the money and waded back toward the Zodiac. The sound of David's jogging steps on the boardwalk disappeared about the time the man tossed the bag into the dinghy and then pulled himself in.

"It's a pleasure to conduct business with a professional," the man in front of me said without evidence of sarcasm.

"Likewise."

"Perhaps we'll meet again."

"You'd have to introduce yourself."

He laughed softly. "Hasta la vista." The accent was perfect.

He turned and waded back to the dinghy. Within five minutes it was as if they had never been there. Only the cool sweat on my face and the rock in the pit of my stomach told me they had.

An internal voice whispered that we could count ourselves

lucky. Another voice, this one louder and angrier, argued that justice had to be served, that there was still a way to make Labrosh pay for the agony he had caused the Stolte family and Tracey.

The night was quiet; the surf, hushed. I concentrated on the whisper, and the other voice sulked but didn't go away.

Without baggage to check, I finished at the Delta counter in about two minutes. Tracey fell into step beside me, and we headed for the escalator. The industrial carpet muffled footsteps and muted conversations, making the area seem less peopled than it was.

"I can't believe you're giving up so easily," she said.

I shrugged. "You said it yourself. The zoning battle has been lost. The only real proof we have about any of this is the testimony of a small boy. Henry Labrosh got what he wanted without incriminating himself. Teresalyn and Blake are no threat to him."

Tracey preceded me onto the escalator and turned sideways. "But you hate loose ends, Hunter."

"What was it you said to me? 'This is the real world, Hunter, not TV. The good guys don't always win, and the bad guys

don't always get thrown in jail.' I'm just being a realist. Besides, anything else I did would be on my own time and not very professional. After all, I am running a business."

Those hazel eyes were penetrating, so I decided to change the subject. "Are the Stoltes going to be okay?"

The escalator deposited us. Car rentals to the right. Gate area to the left.

"Do you ever get over something like this? The fear?"

"With time and the help of good friends. Let me know if you need to stay longer."

"I thought I'd let a few days pass, see what happens. Ty will probably bounce back faster than his parents."

"One of the blessings of youth."

The boy had been kept mildly sedated. All he really remembered was the night boat ride and being without his favorite teddy bear.

"He's already begging David to take him fishing."

We stopped about ten feet from the security checkpoint. Around us, the area seemed almost empty. I knew from what Tracey said that it was an altogether different scene in the winter.

"David was a big help the other night. He's got a good head on his shoulders."

"I used to think so until the two of you hit it off so well so quickly," she said dryly. "What were you up to all day yesterday?"

I shrugged. "Just guy stuff. What's the catch phrase? Male bonding."

Her gaze intensified, and her right eyebrow rose slightly. "What kind of guy stuff?"

I should have known that an unscathed escape wouldn't come easily. I tried to stem the flood of the prior day's memories. There are times when I'd swear she's a witch, the way she can read my mind. Sooner or later, if things went as planned, David and I both would have to deal with her reaction. I preferred later.

"Up until now I was having a hard time thinking of you as someone's stepmother."

She frowned. "Don't make it sound as if I suddenly became twenty years older and grew warts on my nose." Her eyes twinkled. "Mind your manners, or next time you'll have to ride my broom."

I laughed. Two middle-aged couples skirted us, their heads turning in our direction. I decided to git while the gittin' was good.

"Don't get too much sun, Tyler." I tapped the end of her nose. "See you in a couple of weeks."

She trailed me to the security gate, that look coming back into her eyes. I pretended I didn't see it and put my carry-on on the conveyor through the X-ray machine.

"Have a good time," I said, taking her shoulders in my hands, "and get some rest. I promise I won't mess up the files." I gave her forehead a quick kiss and slipped through the metal detector.

As I was retrieving my bag, she called to me.

"What kind of guy stuff, Hunter?"

I smiled and waved and headed for my gate, trying not to savor my little victory too much.

Behind me, I heard her say in a voice that oozed sweetness, "You'll pay for this, Hunter."

A thunderstorm flung rain against the office windows overlooking Vine Street. It was an old building, and the windows ran almost from floor to ceiling. I stood and watched rush-hour traffic battle the torrents of water falling from the sky and spewing up behind wheels. Thunder rattled the glass, and for a moment I was sitting on a moonlit beach watching a storm far out in the Gulf, Tracey's shoulder warm against mine.

The phone jangled through the memory. I returned to my desk, sat down, and picked it up on the third ring. "Hunter Investigations."

"I suppose you're going to tell me you don't know anything about this."

Involuntarily, my eyes went to the front page article that had been clipped from the Fort Myers newspaper. "Hey, Tyler. Don't tell me you flew back a day early and I'm supposed to be at the airport picking you up."

"That's what I thought."

I fingered the scrawled note David had included with the article. "It'll take me too long to get there now. Let a skycap get a cab for you, and I'll either owe you cab fare or take you to dinner."

"What I want to know is how you managed it."

"I could have sworn you said Friday, Tyler. I even have it written down." I searched through the desk drawer for matches. "Somewhere."

"David's doing the same song and dance you are."

I settled for a pair of scissors. Cradling the receiver between my ear and shoulder, I folded David's note into fourths and began cutting it into tiny pieces. "Did David fly up with you?"

"Give it a rest, Hunter. I know you're responsible, and I know David helped. What I want to know is *how* you did it."

I'd heard that tone of voice before, and I knew exactly what she'd look like if she were standing in front of my desk. "Does this mean you're not in Lexington?" Shoulders squared. Hands on hips. Hazel eyes glittering and probing, reaching into my skull to read my thoughts before I spoke them. As far as I was concerned, they could *never* make video telephones a practical reality.

"What are you doing? Destroying the evidence?"

I snipped a little chunk from the end of my index finger. "Damn!" I stuck my finger in my mouth.

"Serves you right."

I examined the finger and scrounged for a Band-Aid. "Tyler, I have no idea what you're talking about." I had to pause in my search to suck the blood from the cut.

Her indulgent sigh filled my ear. "I spent the last three days in the Keys with the Stoltes. I just got back today and found out about it."

I managed to get the Band-Aid around the end of my index finger. "Found out about what?" I found the Express

Mail envelope and began cutting it into slivers.

"Henry Labrosh."

"Don't tell me our old friend has suddenly become environmentally conscious and decided not to develop that land." My desk was beginning to look like the floor of a confetti factory.

"It will snow down here before that happens. But poor Henry is already finding himself out in the cold." There was a decided lack of sympathy in her voice.

"I don't follow." I cut some of the slivers into thirds just to be on the safe side.

"Seems as though Henry ran into a streak of bad luck."

"Oh?" I reached for the newspaper article and then put the scissors down.

"Clarissa found out he's been keeping a mistress in a condo down on Fort Myers Beach."

"Naughty boy." Clipping in hand, I leaned back in my chair and studied the battered face glaring at the camera pointed at him.

"Some thugs broke in on them a couple of nights ago. Wrecked the place. Left Henry with a few physical mementos of the visit. Tied them up naked, back to back, in the middle of this king-size bed and poured honey and whipped cream all over them before calling the police and reporting a prowler.

Evidently they made another call, too, because a TV reporter arrived at the same time as the police."

"Hell hath no fury." I grinned at the newspaper photo and laid it on the desk. It would go in my files at home.

"According to Maisie, Clarissa received an anonymous note along with some interesting photographs the day after you left. She called Maisie to find out if you were still down here, said she wanted to hire you to do some investigating for her."

"I knew I should have stayed a few days longer. Business has been slow up here."

"Maisie said *she* has known about the mistress for about three years. She's surprised Clarissa didn't find out before now."

"Guess Henry got careless."

"Or messed with the wrong person."

"Sounds to me like Clarissa's the wrong person to mess with. Are we talking divorce or enslavement through blackmail?"

"Divorce. And most of the money in that marriage is Clarissa's. According to Maisie, it's tied up some way with Clarissa's family, so Henry can't touch it. Didn't Maisie tell you all this?" Tracey asked innocently.

"We really didn't get much chance to talk at the party." The thunder and lightning seemed to have worn themselves out, but the rain showed no signs of fatigue. "And she was too busy firing questions at me for me to get in any of my own."

"I mean when you saw her later."

"When later?"

"Uh-huh."

"So, did I miss any other excitement by coming back last week?"

"Your innocent act is improving."

"Tyler, you keep talking in riddles."

"Well, riddle me this, Batman. Who sicced the IRS on Henry's real estate firm?"

"You mean the IRS is after him, too?" I whistled. "Bad news. But someone as slick as Labrosh probably has that angle covered."

"Probably. But one of the lawyers that worked with

Blake on the zoning issue said he heard that Henry's partners in the land deal are backing out on him. And the bank is calling in some of his loans."

"Knowing Labrosh, he'll come out of this with only a few battle scars."

"But he's going to have a miserable few months until then. I still can't figure out how you managed to set all this into motion in one day. Even with David's help."

"I told you, Tyler. David and I just did—"

"Guy stuff. Yeah, I know." She sighed again. "I'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

"Tyler?"

"Mmm?"

"You never did tell me why your security code is my birthday."

Her laugh was throaty and evil. "That's right. I didn't. Sweet dreams, Hunter."

I never knew dial tones could snicker.

Only Nights

by Dan Crawford

The stone was dead blank. Polijn ran her hands all over the surface in case the sign had been carved instead of chalked. But no, except for the mile number there was nothing to be read.

She sat down on the milestone, crossed her ankles, and studied the little village in the hollow up ahead. Clarmas might have taken another road, of course. But she hadn't seen one. And if he had decided to bypass this village for some reason, he'd have left a sign to explain why.

A system of symbols existed by which minstrels could tell those who came after what they'd learned about the relative generosity and honesty of the people in a village, any religious taboos that had to be stepped around, and what themes made the biggest hit. In some parts of the world, hints like this could be vital. Here in Turin, for example, listeners could detect political reference in the most innocuous of melodies. Any traveling performer had to be right up on the news.

Of course, such signs were made on leaving the village, so maybe Clarmas was still here. He could be sick or wounded or, even better, finally trapped into matrimony. If that were the case, she must definitely go in and congratulate him, and perhaps repeat some of the gamier sections of his autobiography to his bride.

Polijn got up and started for the village, considering all the possibilities, where and how to begin. Afternoon was well advanced, so people might be gathering at the village inn after an hour or so. Those little lumps in the ground were artificial, forming low dikes. Towns in floodplains could sometimes be impressed by tales of mountains. Or she could start with a Clarmas song. Better to wait, perhaps, and find out what had become of him.

Polijn had encountered Clarmas far to the southwest some two months ago. There had been bandit activity in the area, so the glow of the fire had been both ominous and encouraging. If the fire did not belong to bandits, there might be someone available for company on the trip to safer regions.

There was one person at the fire, a tall, dark-haired man polishing a flute. He rose when he heard footsteps. His sneer was darker than his hair as he looked the intruder up and down.

Then he frowned, as though something was missing. "Say. Where you from?" he demanded.

"East," Polijn told him, and took out her own flute.

Dark eyebrows rose. "Say, you wouldn't be a minstrel, would you?"

"If I wasn't," said Polijn, "I would be." She trilled up the scale and then lowered the flute. "But I am."

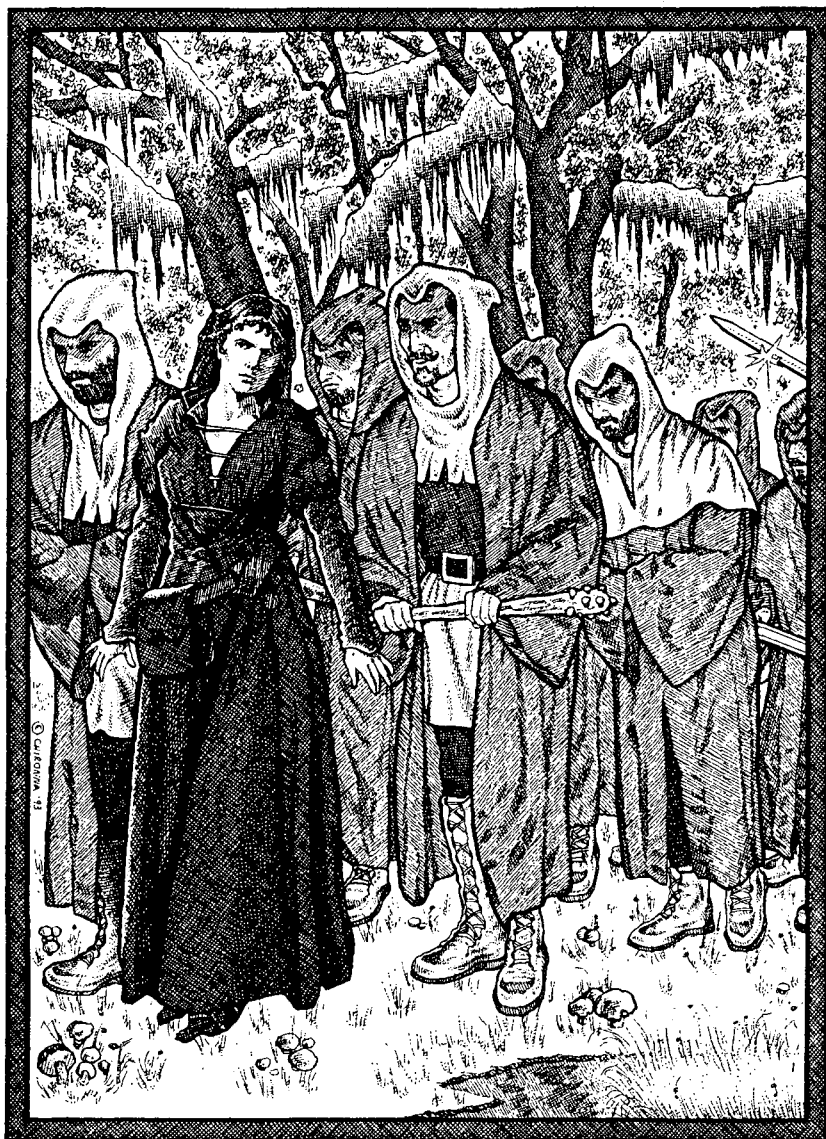
The man came around and gestured to the fire. "Say, I thought you were some village dolly come to make me her life's career. Sit down and help yourself. Good to talk to somebody who's not love-sick or jealous for a change."

They exchanged stories over the campfire, most of his dealing with his improbable conquests in small towns, and near escapes from narrow-minded village officials. The food was good, for Clar-mas added cooking skills to his singing.

They had moved north together, performing duets and spelling each other before audiences. Clar-mas instructed Polijn in the construction of a couple of simple dishes and thereafter let her do all the cooking, "so you'll have the practice." He was like that on the road: lazy, relaxed. But let anything resembling an audience appear, and the sneer came back. Songs he tossed off with a smile over the campfire now roared forth, charged with violence. He would sing and dance and orate to the point of exhaustion for an audience, and audiences seemed to know this.

Clar-mas claimed that he despised the acclaim he earned, and professed intense dislike of everything and everybody in the villages. Yet he seemed to look forward to the village performances and to enjoy the exertion he demanded from himself. Polijn didn't know whether admitting he enjoyed it would expose the fact that he was as human as the villagers, or whether Clar-mas simply enjoyed all the denials, too.

The partnership was cut off the night Polijn awoke to find a village woman preparing to cut off her head, in hopes that it would free Clar-mas for permanent commitment. A more tenuous partnership ensued, but this had turned out to be even more lucrative. Clar-mas worked about two weeks ahead of her, entertaining a village and then moving on. Polijn would then appear in the same village. Her songs about the legendary Clar-mas revived warm



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memories and brought her even more money after her performance. Women wanted to hear every detail, and men wanted to know if she had any idea which direction he'd gone.

The business was not without its risk. She was always careful to find out what sort of odor the minstrel had left behind him before claiming to have been personally acquainted with the legendary Clarmas. And Clarmas had always had a warped sense of humor. While they were together, she had to keep her eyes out for small snakes by the roadside. If she didn't see them first, she'd see them later, in her pack or in her clothes. He would prepare similar surprises now. At Ponfeld, he had explained that to pluck one hair from the head of a legendary minstrel known as Polijn the Dark was to ensure a year's good luck. Polijn barely escaped Ponfeld before she was bald. He outdid himself at Kloagan: according to him, the legendary Polijn the Black, by merely setting her hands on the affected part of the body, cured any form of infertility, impotence, or digestive disorder.

Maybe she could get a little revenge in this village. It would, of course, be simple enough to change into light-colored clothes and call herself something else, at least until she knew what was going on. But the dark ensemble was easy to keep clean, and simplified sneaking out of town by night if that became necessary.

Naked and half-naked children were running around on the verge of the village among red-feathered chickens. This village didn't look especially profitable. Clarmas would have held his nose. But Polijn had grown up in this sort of crowd (as, she suspected, had Clarmas).

The appearance of a stranger naturally interrupted the games. This visitor was obviously no merchant or tax collector. Polijn raised her chin a bit, to let them know she was no mere wanderer looking for a handout. As the realization of what she must be passed through the crowd, some children stared from one spot while others followed as closely as they dared. Polijn could hear them challenging each other to go talk to the sleek, superior minstrel, to . . .

"Oh!"

Polijn turned to see a medium-sized boy dashing off with three long black hairs. Well, Clarmas had been here. Any minute now, there'd come some cry of "Hey, Fistful!" from a barred window. (He cooked with "a fistful of this, and just two fistfuls of that," and had declared Polijn to be no bigger than one fistful. Polijn didn't mind

as long as he called her that only on the road. In some towns it was better not to mention fists at all.)

She raised an eyebrow. This village was a little more prosperous than it had seemed from outside. At least one inn could afford a sign, declaring itself to be The Drunken Dragon. There must be some kind of trade route through this hollow; the townspeople would know which house was the inn without a sign.

Polijn unlimbered her fiddle, checked the tuning, and started in on a song about the inn's beer, which fostered fertility, heightened happiness, engendered joy, and, if tales were to be believed, brought rain in times of drought. She frequently used this as her opening number: at least one ally could be made early on in case things went awry later.

Sure enough, by the time she'd reached the third verse, a man carrying a foaming mug appeared, noting, "That's a fine bit of music, a fine, fine piece of singing."

Her host was barrel-shaped, with billows of black hair sticking out over the top of his apron. A smell of raw meat about him made him a bit unpleasant but did continue the general air of prosperity.

"No more than you deserve, I'm sure." Polijn was always careful to say this before she tasted the beer.

It wasn't bad. "We've not seen a minstrel in Kanver for many a day," the innkeeper went on. "For long weeks."

"Ah, now." Polijn wiped her lips. "I've been hearing I had a colleague ahead of me on the road. Wherever I stop, I hear people talking about someone named Clarmas."

The innkeeper dismissed Clarmas with a toss of the head. "He was no singer to compare with you. An arrogant dog's vomit he was. We didn't encourage him to linger, or ask him to stay."

Polijn had learned her sneer of fine contempt from other teachers, but Clarmas had helped refine it. "What was it?" she inquired. "Women?"

The innkeeper's sneer wasn't bad, either. "The chicken neck wasn't here long enough for that."

Pity, thought Polijn. There was mighty little profit in that. It looked as if she'd have to go with her more vigorous, clownish numbers.

"Then he no doubt didn't have time to sing you this," she said, setting the mug down by her feet. She tucked into "The Drunken Dragon" in honor of his sign and because it was a good, raucous number with dozens of verses to call in the crowds.

The crowds duly gathered, keeping the innkeeper busy with demands for his beer. They were not shy about demanding their favorite songs, either, and Polijn had no trouble satisfying them until one man shouted, "Let's have 'The Creation'!"

"Ah, now." Polijn shook her head. "You know I can't sing that, friend." Women were forbidden by law in Turin to perform sacred songs. And, frankly, the Turinese creation song, explaining that the continent was the byproduct of a urination contest between two male and two female spirits, had little to offer from an artistic standpoint.

"Why, that might be allowed; it might be possible," said the innkeeper, whose name was apparently Arville, to judge by the crowd's calls. "We'll ask the mayor."

The man who stepped through the crowd was in every way the innkeeper's opposite: thin, brisk, and redhaired. A smile spread across his polished features as he moved forward with the brisk energy that had probably gotten him elected. Polijn's eyes were on the pouch at his belt.

"Why, it's good to hear the traditional songs, no matter who sings them," said the mayor, looking to the crowd for agreement. Several voices cried, "Aye!"

"And," he went on, with a shrug that made his pouch jingle with promise, "a minor infraction of our Lady Laws would cost no more than a fine of five coppers. A good minstrel is easily worth fifteen."

Polijn bowed. She had worked this game all over Turin. She put one hand where he could count fifteen coppers into it. After she performed the song, she would be "arrested," fined five coppers, and released with a clear profit of ten. The mayor would be shown to be generous and yet diligent in enforcing the law, keeping him in good with his community.

She took another sip from her mug and flexed her shoulders, shaking some of the kinks from her arms. This lintik song had to be performed with all the traditional motions or the crowd would complain. And the afternoon sun was baking the front of the inn. They could have picked a less strenuous hymn.

Applause was a bit restrained when she finished. What more did these people want? She'd done everything but tear off her clothes.

Their eyes were not on her. Polijn turned to see the mayor stepping up to her again from the place he'd taken in the audience. Fine thing: not only did he spoil her finish, but now she was going to have to pay five coppers for the privilege.

"Constable?" he said.

Arville reached down to take hold of one of Polijn's wrists. "I have the malefactor in custody, Your Honor."

The audience was starting to break up. Polijn decided she was going to have to talk to the mayor about this. Ten coppers was a fair profit, but she'd have had more if he'd waited to arrest her until after she'd taken up her collection.

"You realize," said the innkeeper, "that you have broken our Lady Laws?"

"Oh, my," Polijn replied. "I do believe you are correct, sir. I presume there is a fine involved? I am very sorry." Best to act the part, she supposed.

The mayor linked his thumbs, and looked very mournful. "There is a five copper fine for that infraction," he said.

Polijn reached into her pack for the coppers he had given her. "But," he went on, "technically, the specific charge against you is blasphemy."

"Blasphemy!" said Arville. He ran the thumbnail of his free hand between the front teeth of his smile. "Isn't that a fine of twenty silver pieces?"

Polijn looked from one man to the other. There had been no time for them to make this up after she arrived. They'd worked this trick before. No wonder the inn looked so prosperous. And that was why the crowd was thinning; they'd heard this song before.

Clarvas would not have stood for this; he'd have fought. Likely he had. Nine large men with clubs were moving up through the crowd; two had black eyes. Good for Clarvas, but bad for her: he had made them more cautious, and they moved in close.

Nothing for it but to take what was coming, she supposed. "I do regret the infraction, my lord mayor," she said without a hint of irony, "but I do not have twenty silver pieces."

"Why, we can make other arrangements, I do suppose," the mayor replied. He did look mighty proud of himself. "Perhaps you could work off the fine."

Arville was standing very close behind her. The mayor, nine constables, and the innkeeper: and they'd proved they couldn't be trusted.

The mayor noticed a certain lack of enthusiasm and cocked an eyebrow. "Otherwise, I fear we'll have to let the law take its course and stake you out in the fen for the bubilkina. They require rather more than we do."

The mayor and Polijn looked into each other's faces for a full minute. Polijn did not sneer. She just said, "I believe I'll try the bubilkina."

Polijn expected to be bounced against the wall of the inn and kicked through the main street of town at the very least. But once the mayor had relieved her of her pack, the company simply assembled around her and marched her out of the village.

The situation was not entirely new to Polijn. Wandering minstrels were fair game for being staked out as bait or sacrifice to the forces of wood and wild. Wizards were seldom to be seen these days, and minstrels were considered the next best thing. Villagers simply figured that if the minstrel was any good she'd have a chance.

The company moved out into a low, marshy area, gloomed by tipping trees that dripped with moss. Polijn didn't like the looks of the place by daylight and supposed it was worse by night. The mosquitoes would drain her long before the bubilkina, if any, got a chance.

A maltreated tree on a little rise bore rope burns marking it as the village's dule tree. Roots had been exposed by the rise and fall of the water, and little bushes had grown up here and there where dying branches above had made room for the sun to get through the leafy canopy.

Two of the constable's helpers attached her right wrist to a branch on one side of the trunk while two more tied her left to a limb on the other side. This extended her far enough to bring her up on her tiptoes, giving her the full benefit of the root that poked into the small of her back.

The mayor stood back to study the effect. Polijn considered the possibilities besides justice for tying a captive to a tree, particularly in this pose.

"This cannot be comfortable." Arvile set one hand on the undercurve of her stomach.

"You see how we are saved the expense of a jail," the mayor told her. "Now that you've seen it, are you sure we can't change your mind?"

Polijn could not see the point of saying anything and so said nothing. "Yes" and "no" would be similarly useless right now.

He moved his hand to the left and the right. One of the armed assistants leaned in and whispered, "Getting dark."

Arvile looked up, and then to the west. He pulled his hand away.

"Timing is everything," noted the mayor. "The body may be cooler in the morning, but it will look much the same. Until then, my minstrel."

Polijn was a little surprised to see the whole company turn and move back up the path to the village. Maybe there actually were bubilkina in this marsh, or wild animals that would duplicate the effect. Or the mayor and Arville might have fostered the story of bubilkina just so they wouldn't have to share their captives with the assistants, and would be back later.

Polijn did not really intend to wait around and see. She pulled her arms in toward the trunk of the tree. The ropes moved just far enough for her to set her feet flat on the ground. Keeping her left arm where it was, she slid the right arm away. Her main hope was that she could slide to where the branch was thin enough to let her pull her wrist out of the ropes, but if that didn't work, she wanted to get far enough to one side of the trunk to climb onto a branch and work at the ropes with her teeth.

If it was a bubilkin, or a group of bubilkina, there might be nothing to fear. According to the songs, the bubilkina were remnants of an undead army commanded by the evil sorcerer Arghast centuries ago. They appeared now primarily in comic songs; the brave and intelligent bubilkina were held to have died in the forefront of that army, their ashes scattered to the winds by good wizards. Only the cowards and the stupid had survived. According to songs.

Polijn kicked her legs up to the right. One foot hit the trunk, and another the branch. She came down hard against the root at her back. She took two breaths and slid to the left to see if the branch on that side was more easy of access.

The moon was rising. So was the mist. She wished one or the other would stay put because the way the moon enhanced the fog was not at all encouraging. She tried kicking up to the left. Both feet hit the trunk this time. Tossing one foot out to try to break her fall, she found a scraggly bush. This didn't slow her much, and she came down hard against the root again as little leaves fluttered around her ankles.

A slower approach, working her feet up behind her onto the root, did her no good; the damp air had made the tree far too slippery. She came down again, though not so fast.

While she caught her breath, she studied the ground for anything that might be useful. Those leaves didn't look quite right.

She leaned forward as far as she could. They weren't leaves, but petals. She had kicked through a half-dead wild rosebush.

She set a foot up behind her but paused. Wild roses were supposed to be a defense against the bubilkina. It might be worth her while, just in case there actually was an undead warrior waiting in this morass, to try to use them. A circle or half circle of the petals around her might give her an edge.

The idea was so simple when it came to her. But in the mud, and working with her toes, it became somewhat complex. Some of the petals disappeared in the mud at her touch; others got stuck against lumps in the mud and wouldn't budge. What she finished with was not much of a semicircle. It looked more like a pinkish snake thrashing in the throes of violent digestive problems.

She needed rest again. She set her head back against the trunk.

Her head came up. There was that sound again, a *splop splop splop* of boots moving through deep mud. The mayor? Arville? But they knew where to walk to keep dry. Clarmas, then?

Just as she made out the approaching figure in the luminous fog, she understood what was wrong with the sound. Anyone walking in muck that deep should be breathing hard. Polijn heard no breathing at all.

A breeze laden with damp rot hit her. The figure kept coming, its features still obscured by the mist. Then she realized these were all the features it had.

Her visitor was a damp, shriveled creature with a mouth that cut its face in half. Empty eye sockets sat above this, dripping teeth hung below. A tattered, rotting robe hung open all the way in front to expose a muscular body covered with either short hair or thick mold. Long fingers dangled from each sleeve.

The mouth smacked open, and a sound that was either choke or chuckle escaped. Polijn twisted back, scratching her arms on the ropes. If this was one of the bumbling survivors, she didn't want to meet any of the leaders.

The bubilkin stepped up onto higher ground, apparently removing its feet from the gunk without effort. There was no doubt about his destination. Polijn tried once more to slip her wrists out between the bark and the ropes. This did her about as much good as her previous efforts.

The thin grey lips smacked again. Then they dropped open, as if in surprise. The creature looked down. So did Polijn.

They both looked up from the squiggle of rose petals. Their eyes met. Polijn saw nothing much, but she knew a laugh when she heard it. Well, it had been worth a try.

One dripping hand came up into Polijn's hair as the bubilkin stepped over the little barrier. Getting a good grip, he hauled back.

Polijn protested at the same time the bubilkin cried out. When he hauled back a second time, she wondered if her hair was all he wanted. But at that moment the creature realized his grip on the hair was impeding his escape, and let go.

Polijn's eyelids stretched as she saw the pink streamer flailing at the creature's ankle. The bubilkin leaped and hopped out into the marsh, tearing at the object. Something at the front of the long pink line was attached.

Glowing, the string began to swell. The bubilkin grabbed at it with both hands, and bit at it. Polijn looked down. The meandering line of rose petals was gone.

In the bog, the bubilkin screamed. It had vanished in the fog, but Polijn could still spy the glow of the snake she'd built. She followed it with her eyes into the darkness. Just as it seemed likely to vanish, it grew brighter.

Polijn wondered just how big it was going to get, and realized that it was not growing because of expansion but because it was on its way back. Bright eyes and glowing fangs showed no sign of any fragments of the bubilkin.

She kicked back up at the tree again and succeeded this time in getting one foot hooked around a branch. But the snake didn't look at her as it came back up onto the little rise. It passed the tree and slithered under the rosebush.

With a crackling, popping sound, the half-dead bush burst into full bloom, looking suddenly more sturdy than the tree. Polijn spared one moment for staring and then went back to work on her bonds.

They were dripping, but she finally got them loose. Freed, she just clung to the branch for a while, studying the bush. Even without her pack, there ought to be a way to take a few of the rose petals with her. They were bound to be useful for something.

Best to leave soon, she decided. That sounded like rain in the distance. And all her raingear was up at the mayor's house now.

She started to slither down the trunk, but stopped. The sound was coming nearer, and that *splop, splop* was not being caused by raindrops.

From her vantage point in the tree, she surveyed the soggy field. Which way could she step without stepping into a sinkhole? She had to hurry, but hurrying to a dripping death was not what she had in mind.

She could hear the feet coming closer: lots of feet. A column of figures appeared in the murk, not so withered as the first. Little dots of light showed they still had most of their eyes. The intense smell of mildew grew up into her nostrils.

But Polijn, faced now with a choice between meeting the army of bubilkina or merely drowning, irrationally decided to hold her ground. Her head tipped to one side. She listened.

For the creatures were saying something. They didn't say it very well, lacking a lot of teeth and tongues, but it seemed to be "Three. Three." Or maybe it was "Tree. Tree."

Their leader was a tall woman, her dress tattered from the waist down, her lower lip in ruins. She came right up to the tree and looked into Polijn's face. Polijn looked back, not liking it much.

"We were staked out in the nane oth the law," said the undead woman, struggling with a partial mouth. "There *he* took us. Athter *he* drained us, and the naylor looted us, we were thrown to the waters, and *he* took us to his castle below. Only *he* knew how to leave the castle. *He* released us by night to dine on animals, and his leavings, but daylight thorses us down again. Now that he is gone, we can be three."

Polijn caught on. "What can I do?" she asked.

"Three us, as you threed him," the woman replied.

Polijn shinnied down the tree, keeping one eye on the undead. Not that it made any difference at this point whether she saw them coming or not. She looked from the rosebush to the woman, shrugged, and took a handful of petals.

"Be free, then," she said and tossed the petals out.

The woman turned bright pink as the bits of flower hit her, and then gold. Her face healed. "Free!" she sobbed, and vanished.

Another bubilkin stepped up into the spot where the afterglow of the woman still lingered, crying, "Me next! My turn!"

Polijn sized up the crowd, and carefully plucked just two petals. This did not diminish the effect. For the next supplicant she tried just one. This produced the same result.

Just by the sound of it, Polijn might have welcomed a job strewing rose petals. Now, as bubilkin after bubilkin marched up to her, and the rosebush grew dimmer and emptier, even her calloused

fingers grew sore from the unaccustomed labor. "Be free, then," got a little old after a while, so she tried "Go free" without changing the outcome, and "Walk free," and then "Freed be thou from this curse," and, finally, nothing at all as her throat got sore. The glowing undead still passed away, shining. She was glad when the last of them reached her.

Then she cried, "You!"

"What's the matter?" Clarmas demanded. "I'm not pretty enough?"

They hadn't all been women, at that. Polijn shook her head in amazement.

He misunderstood. "You can't leave me here, Fistful!" he cried. "I'll go back to his vault at dawn and never get out again! When we're locked in overnight, sometimes, we have to prey on what lives down there: the vermin, the mud-creatures. Revolting stuff, and then they're undead, too, and live with us. I swear, if you leave me, I'll take you along!"

Polijn reached for the rosebush but stopped. "It's a while yet until dawn," she said. "Why don't you do me a favor, quick?"

"Just name it, Fistful." He brushed slick hair from his forehead. "I'll be grateful as long as I . . . well, name it anyhow."

When she named it, he didn't even pause to agree, running out through murk and muck as if strolling along the king's highway. Polijn reached for the rose petals, to be ready for his return, and didn't see any. The bush was bare.

She dropped to all fours and spread the mud with her hands. She found only grass, and mud, and pebbles. Finally a little glimmer tipped her off. She raised one bedraggled flower fragment just as someone singing the racier sections of the ballad of Sir Face and Lady Love slobbered through the mud.

It had obviously been no trouble at all. "You were a pretty good cook, Fistful," he said. "I should have known you'd fix me a good last meal."

"All of them?" she said. "Arville?"

Clarmas sneered at the thought of Arville. "He and the mayor and their buddies can see how they like being in the swamp what they were in the town." He passed her two bundles. "My pack was still among their loot, too. Take what you need. I'm going where a poor minstrel doesn't have to pay for a thing."

It sounded good. Polijn reached out and took his hand, the rose petal in her palm. Both hands grew warm, and one disappeared.

Polijn stood there until the afterglow disappeared completely. She wondered if there was any significance to the fact that his hips vanished last, and decided there wasn't.

Now all she had to do was step carefully, and get out of there. Clarmas, she recalled, had had a good, watertight pair of overshoes in his pack. She raised the top flap.

Then she dropped the pack. Three big green snakes shot out, hunting for hiding places. Polijn almost thought she could hear Clarmas laughing.

(continued from page 4)

like puzzles here, as you know, but that could be one too many.

We can explain—and apologize. On January fifteenth, our mailing center in Salem, Illinois, burned up. No lives were lost, thank goodness, but hundreds of thousands of magazines went up in flames (not only ours but those of other publishers as well), including all those March issues destined for new subscribers.

The issue was reprinted, of course, and was shipped out on February sixteenth, more or less halfway between the shipping dates for the April issue and the May issue.

So that's why our calendar has seemed in disarray. With luck, every issue will come in order from now on.

And now, on to our June Double Issue, where all the puzzles are firmly where they should be.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

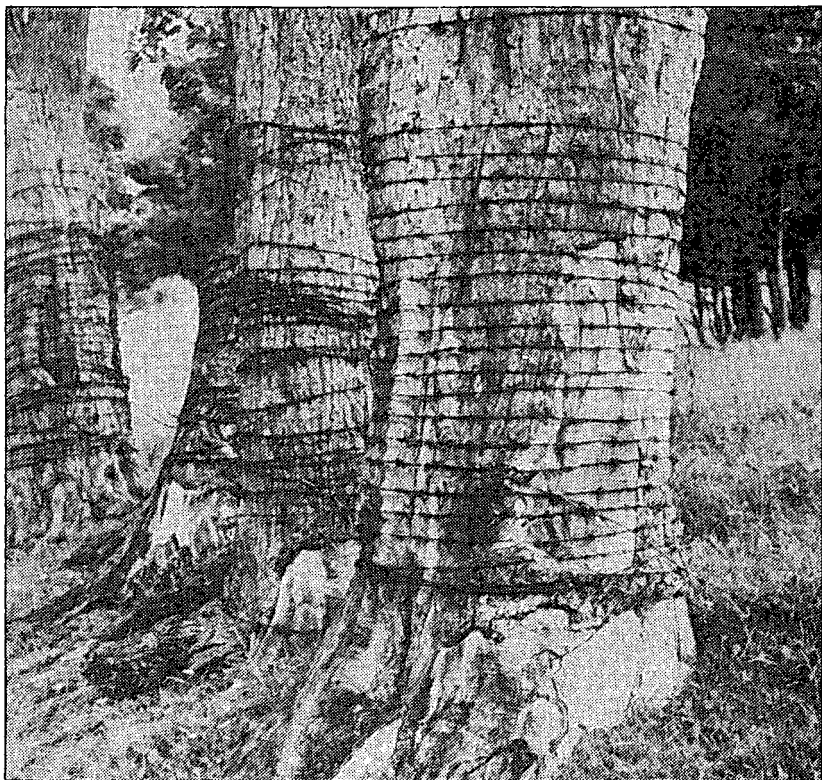


Photo by Myrna J. Yancey

Their bark is worse than their bite. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 283.

The Red Pickup

by Ray Davidson

“**H**erringbone” Tweede (Private Investigations) maneuvered the old Aspen along downtown Main Street of Salt Lake City toward a parking spot against the curb between Fifth and Sixth South. He was just congratulating himself on finding a spot so close to his destination when an immaculate red pickup, chrome 3-spot roll bar and other miscellaneous trim agleam in the sun, appeared from nowhere, cut in ahead of him, and took the spot in one grandiloquent swoop.

Speechless, Tweede watched the driver descend. He was dressed in a navy blue pin-stripe suit over a maroon striped shirt with white collar and cuffs, a dark polka dot tie, a belt with a buckle the size and general appearance of a small majolica plate, and fancy leather cowboy boots worth, Tweede estimated, a bit more than the Aspen. Except for the boots, the man might have been a banker freshly released from the clutches of his personal barber and valet.

The man glanced at Tweede as the Aspen rolled slowly past, showed his teeth in a genial grin that failed to reach his eyes, and strode off down the sidewalk toward the Broadway intersection. Tweede kept pace with him, hoping to run him down at the crossing, but was foiled again when a timid motorist swerved from the middle to the curb lane just in front of him, then decided there wasn't time to get through before the light turned red, and pulled to a stop. The man crossed the intersection and disappeared.

Tweede ground his teeth in frustration as he waited for the light to change again. What, he asked himself, could you expect from a dude in fancy dress who drove a pickup and wore cowboy boots? There had to be something profound in it, but Tweede gave up trying to figure it out. Apparently, you had to be born in Utah to understand. Anyway, he'd probably never see the guy again, so . . . he sighed, then jotted the pickup's license number down on the notepad he always carried in the Aspen. You never knew.

Tweede found another, much less handy space, locked the Aspen, and headed for the old post office, which now housed certain federal courts. He was due to testify in a case. He had been warned anonymously that it would be healthier if he didn't, but he didn't take the threat seriously. After all, this was Salt Lake City, not Los Angeles. As a former resident of Lalaland, there was little Salt Lake could do or say that was likely to throw him into a tizzy.

Two hours later he emerged from the old granite building, his job done. He'd gone to the court straight from his apartment in Murray. Now, his stint at court over, he reclaimed the Aspen and drove to his office on Third West. The red pickup, he noted, was still in its pirated spot, and to his delight, there was a parking ticket tucked under the wiper. It was nice to know that justice was still being served on occasion.

When he got to his office, the light on his answering machine was flashing. He sat, grimaced at the squeal of protest from the chair (the shock grease hadn't been any more effective than anything else he'd tried), and pushed the replay.

"Tweede? Brady. Give me a call."

Intrigued, Tweede punched in the number and waited out the intermittent burr.

"Sheriff's office; Brady speaking."

"This is Herringbone," Tweede said. "What's up? Got a warrant for my arrest on vagrancy charges?"

"Business is slow, is it?"

"Business is dead at the moment."

"Good! That means you might beat the rap. No warrant, just a warning. How are you at birdwatching?"

"What?"

"Birdwatching. Spying on birds through binoculars."

"Sorry, you've got the wrong man. Human birds I might watch. Bird birds, no."

"We think you'd better take it up—for a week or so anyway. I'm serious, Tweede. There's some revenge running around, and it could land on you anytime."

"Oh? That's the warning?"

"I know, I know. This isn't Los Angeles. That doesn't make it any less dangerous; just different. Look, Mike Aaron, a friend of mine, has a cabin up in the Uintas he's not using right now. Take a week off and go watch birds or whatever. They've just released some Rocky Mountain goats up there somewhere. Maybe you'll get a glimpse of one of those."

"Sorry, Brady. I don't think the Aspen would make it."

"We can't make you go, but you're a fool to stick around. You put a noose on that guy this morning, and he's got a couple of friends that don't like you very much."

"So pull them in."

"We will, but it would be a heck of a lot easier if you were out of the picture."

"I'm touched, Brady. Really. But . . ."

"You're also not very bright. Don't say we didn't warn you." The sound of the handset being replaced in its cradle seemed unnecessarily abrupt and loud. Tweede sighed. It was turning out to be a rotten day.

Twenty minutes later, as he stood up to go to the washroom down the hall, his window shattered, and glass fragments almost beat the sound of the report to his ear. Simultaneously, a solid *thunk* echoed from the far wall of the office. He pulled out his handkerchief, bunched it against his ear to staunch the flow and perhaps ease the sting, and sidled across to the outside wall out of sight of the window. There he gave himself to some furious thinking. A few moments later, he hunched down, crawled across to the desk and lifted down the handset.

"Brady? Tweede. Where is this cabin?"

"What changed your mind?"

"Someone just took a shot at me through my window."

"Keep away from the window. We'll be right over," Brady growled. "I'll bring a map."

The cabin was surprisingly comfortable. He'd left the Aspen parked in its space behind his office and rented a four-wheel-drive Subaru. Brady had tried to sell him on a pickup, but Tweede wasn't having any. The Subaru was now parked beside the cabin, up to its hubcaps in snow. The cabin's bed was big and soft and the small kitchenette convenient and fairly modern. Brady's friend was obviously not the roughing-it type.

Tweede started a fire in the fireplace and had just settled back in a squeal-free recliner when someone knocked at the cabin door. He was out of the chair like a cat out of an occupied doghouse before the echo faded.

"Yes?" he called.

"UHP," a voice replied.

Tweede wasn't born yesterday. He moved cautiously to a nearby window that commanded a view of the cabin's front yard and a glimpse, if you strained, of the doorstep. The

yard was occupied by a perfectly genuine Utah Highway Patrol cruiser and the doorstep by the trooper himself in regulation UHP uniform.

Tweede relaxed and opened the door.

"Mr. Tweede?" the trooper asked. "Good. The Salt Lake county sheriff's office asked us to check up to see if you got here all right. I'm Montgomery. Any trouble, just call this number." He handed Tweede a card with the address and telephone number of the nearest UHP district office. "We'll have the telephone connected for you," the trooper continued. "No trouble. Be seeing you."

For the second time in as many days, Tweede wondered just what he'd gotten himself into. But it was too late to back out now.

Take one longtime resident of Los Angeles still fairly newly arrived in Utah, a rather small nonviolent type whose idea of wilderness living is a stroll through Griffith Park, and put him in the middle of a mountainous winter landscape, sunny but definitely cold, in a mountain cabin fronting a mountain road that disappears quickly in both directions among stands of aspen and fir... Can boredom be far behind?

Tweede put in a day lounging and reading year-old *Reader's Digests* and an old volume on the history of Duchesne County. After two pages he could understand how the book had been relegated to the cabin. Its grip on the reader was even weaker than that of your average local telephone directory. On the second day, he found himself actually leafing through the directory as well—not an overwhelming task—and he began to feel the stirrings of cabin fever. Twice he had heard the roar of a vehicle of some kind passing along the road to the front but had not gotten to the window in time to catch sight of it. Just the sound meant, however, that somewhere not too far away there must be neighbors—someone who could serve to assure him that the world hadn't suddenly ceased to be inhabited.

In a closet near the front door he found a parkalike garment and a pair of fleece-lined boots. Both were a trifle large on him, but they would do. He put them on and prepared to leave the cabin for a short hike in the snow. His hands were bare, but the pockets of the parka were capacious, and its hood shielded his head and ears from the worst of the cold. He stepped outside.

Almost immediately his glasses began to steam up, and his nose turned bright red. It was while he was peering into the fog caused by his glasses that he heard the vehicle approaching again. He pulled the glasses off just in time to catch a near-sighted, astigmatic glimpse of a red pickup, three-spot roll bar and miscellaneous chrome trim flashing intermittently in the late afternoon sun, leaving the shadow of the fir at the left of his small clearing. It moved rapidly across the open stretch and disappeared again into the aspen to his right. Tweede blinked. There were probably hundreds of red pickups in Utah, many with roll bars, but somehow he knew that the one he had just seen was no stranger.

He put the glasses back on—the fog, he found, had dissipated—and stared at the place where the road disappeared into the trees. By now his nose was beginning to run and his hands to ache slightly. Defeated by the cold, he turned and went thoughtfully back into the cabin. For such a vast wilderness of whiteness, trees, and undergrowth, it was a small world after all.

He heard no more of the pickup that day or the next, but on the fourth day one of those sudden turns in the weather

sailed in, the sun beamed down kindly upon the land, and snow began to melt all over the place. He put on the parka, the boots, and a pair of gloves he found on the top shelf of the closet and ventured out again. It was distinctly warmer now, and he was contemplating a short hike down the road when he heard the phone ring. He hurried back in and lifted the receiver off its hook.

"Tweede," he said. It came out hoarse and almost unintelligible. He tried again. "Tweede."

"You sound like you're dying of something," Brady said, his voice sounding tinnily jovial over the line.

"Boredom," Tweede replied. "I haven't uttered a word to anyone for three days."

"Well, sit tight a couple more days. We've got a line on the guys who shot at you. With any luck, they'll still carry the gun, and we can match up the rifling on the bullet we dug out of your wall. So, what's doing up there in the high Uintas, Herringbone?"

"I suspect there are lonelier places in the world, but I can't think of any offhand," Tweede said.

"It's the mark of a fulfilled man when he can live with nothing but his own company and be content." Brady was ob-

viously quoting, though he offered no citation.

"Plagiarism is a crime, you know," Tweede responded nastily.

Brady laughed. "Give us a couple more days, and you can come back to life," he said, then characteristically broke the connection without saying goodbye. Well, it was one way of getting the last word.

Tweede cradled the phone, paused a moment in concentrated thought, then picked it up again and dialed Brady's number.

"Brady."

"Listen, you can do the exile a favor if you're not too over-come with work," Tweede said.

"You again," Brady said. "What's the favor?"

"Get me the name of the owner of a pickup truck, license number, uh . . ." He dug at the numbers buried in his memory, then spelled them out over the phone. "I think that's right. I'm going from memory. It's a red Ford quarter-ton with lots of fancy trimmings."

Brady grunted. "What's the reason for this request?" he asked.

"Theft. He stole my parking place in Salt Lake the other day."

Brady would have objected, but Tweede, feeling virtuous, gently hung the receiver back

on its fork and patted the old fashioned decorator-model wall phone in satisfaction.

A half hour later, Brady called back.

"Listen, Herringbone; what's up? You in some kind of trouble up there?"

"Should I be?"

"I don't know. The owner of the pickup—if it's the same one—is Howard Bell."

"Who's Howard Bell?" Tweede asked.

"As near as I can make out," Brady replied, "he's a very well-to-do rancher out of Vernal. He's also a highly vocal member of the NRA and a buddy of several state representatives and a senator or two in the legislature—the Republican kind."

"I see." Tweede thought a moment, then, "Where's Vernal?" he asked.

"East of you about sixty miles or so as the crow flies. Over near the Colorado border on U.S. 40. Listen! What's going on? You got trouble?"

"Not that I know of," Tweede replied. "The place is as quiet as a cemetery at midnight. But . . . maybe Mr. Bell owns a cabin up the road or something. He's passed here a few times, and this sure isn't highway 40. He's not got any connection with the case or the shooting, has he?"

"Nah! Your crew were punks, young break-and-enter experts. You're just getting stir-crazy, Herringbone. Grit your teeth. It'll be over by the weekend, and you can come home."

Once again, a clatter followed by a buzz told Tweede that Brady had gotten the last word. He rehung the receiver, then climbed into the parka and boots and went outside.

By now Tweede had gotten somewhat used to the solitude. It was a glorious day. The cold had abated enough to make it seem almost springlike. The air was clear and clean with the scent of pine and earth, and the snow sparkled in the sun. Occasional birdcalls sounded in various directions, and a chuckle of water running somewhere made background music. Tweede expanded his lungs and surveyed the serenity through mist-free glasses. A hike up the road and back seemed just what he needed.

He walked down to the road and peered along it into the tunnel formed by the aspen that grew thick on either side. It was a serpentine road. He remembered that coming up he had spent most of his time turning the wheel first one way, then the other. Apparently, the character of the road didn't change as it went farther up the grade. He shrugged and

started trudging up the road, hands in pockets, binoculars hanging on their strap around his neck. Oh yes. Brady had insisted that he assume the cover even though Tweede assured him that he couldn't tell a yellow-bellied sapsucker from a tit-willow. "You never know," Brady had insisted.

The road curved and twisted its way through the stand of aspen, with occasional varieties of other trees thrown in, for more than a mile up the grade. Unused to the effort, Tweede was telling himself that enough was about enough when the crack of a distant gunshot echoed from somewhere ahead, followed by two more in quick succession. Putting his intentions on hold, he rounded the next curve and found himself looking out onto a smallish upland meadow irregularly ringed with fir and aspen. The road crossed the meadow in a long, sweeping curve that tended to hug one edge and disappeared into fir again. Above the fir, a thin thread of smoke climbed into the sky, then bent at a ninety-degree angle and trailed off in a plume pointing roughly northeast.

The meadow was empty of any life above the vegetative, not counting possible birds. And insects, of course. Tweede

brought up the binoculars and swept the grasses. Yes, there were birds—small things flinging themselves here and there with nervous energy, seldom still long enough to get a good look at. Tweede wondered how the birdwatchers' managed. He let the glasses drop and stood for a moment gazing into the distance. It was a pretty sight, like something one might find on a calendar, but . . .

Suddenly, with no warning at all, a young stag with a handsome and promising rack leapt from the shelter of a stand of fir on the other side of the clearing and bounded across an open arm of the meadow toward another, somewhat denser cluster of fir. It had gotten about two-thirds of the way when another crack sounded, followed immediately by a couple of echoes, and the animal shuddered in midleap and crashed to the ground.

Tweede swung the binoculars up again as a distant, erect figure emerged from the trees and strode toward the spot where the stag had disappeared among the tall grass. It was a man Tweede had never seen before, so far as he could make out the features—a paunchy, heavy-jowled man wearing Levi's and a plaid shirt under one of those ballooning, down-

filled vests, which was hanging open at the moment. He carried an ominous, gleaming rifle with telescope sights held crosswise in front of his belly, and there was a Stetson-style hat on his head, but somehow Tweede had the instant impression that this person's home turf was more likely a boardroom than the wilds of the upland Uintas. Everything was new—even the Levi's looked creased down the front of his thick legs—but that was straining the resolution of the binoculars, and Tweede couldn't be sure.

So much Tweede saw before the man reached the spot where the stag lay hidden. Tweede watched him bend over and prod at something with the rifle, then straighten and gaze about. Tweede stepped back involuntarily into the deeper shadow of the aspens and continued to watch while fiddling with the focus of the binoculars. Alternately he peered through the eyepieces, then lowered them to get the broader view.

It was while he was gazing naked-eyed across the meadow that another figure emerged from the firs and walked up to the first. Tweede swung the glasses up again. This one was tall, lean, and much more authentic looking. The Levi's

were faded and uncreased, the parka jacket obviously worn, and the hat a more serviceable stocking cap done in red, green, and blue. He too carried a rifle, one that looked as though it had seen considerable use.

Both men peered down at the fallen stag, then turned and surveyed the landscape, and Tweede stepped back again. He wasn't quick enough, however, for as Tweede watched the tall man raised his rifle in one hand and pointed it straight at Tweede, saying something to the other. Instinctively, Tweede let the binoculars fall and turned away, moving swiftly through the aspen and out of sight of the meadow before ploughing his way back to the road.

He made it to the cabin a lot faster than he had come from it. Once in the cabin, he couldn't have said why he had run like that. Seeing the stag killed had made him uneasy, but surely it was none of his business if others enjoyed hunting.

It was nearing noon the following day when the phone rang. Tweede took down the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Tweede? Brady. You can come home now. We got the punks that shot at you. They

still had the gun, and the riflings on the bullets match. Spot any interesting birds?"

"You've got to be joking," Tweede protested. "It's still winter up here. You think I want to freeze my buns watching birds?"

"Well, come on home then and watch humans."

"I'm on my way," Tweede promised, but Brady had already severed the connection.

Though he was anxious to get back to civilization, Tweede didn't hurry about setting out. He stripped the bed and set the clothes washer going, cleaned up the kitchenette and washed his dishes, gathered up the few things he had brought, and tidied up the cabin. He hadn't, he thought as he looked around the place, made that much impression on it to begin with.

Sometime while he was engaged in his neatness orgy, he heard the red pickup go by outside but paid it no attention. Soon he'd be quit of the place and in all probability would never see it again. Vernal is a long way from Salt Lake.

By three he was ready. He slung his few possessions into the Subaru, made a last round to see that everything was locked up, and backed the car to the road, heading down the grade. It would be late when he got home, but he preferred that

to another night in the silent cabin.

He had left the narrow, rutted mountain road and was about ten miles or so down the empty, ill-kept, paved two-laner from which it arose when he caught a glimpse of something in the rear view mirror—a flicker of movement among the trees behind him. It was gone before he could identify it. He continued on, driving more cautiously than he might have done in town, even though he had encountered no other cars since he left the cabin. It was not a heavily frequented road in any case. He was reflecting on the absence of traffic when, with a characteristic suddenness, the road abruptly emerged from trees and ran straight for some four or five hundred yards across an open meadow toward a narrow split in the rock upthrust at the far side.

He remembered the place. On the way up, the Subaru had labored up a narrow, steep curve that hugged a cliff on one side and skirted a drop of several hundred feet on the other with nothing between the edge of the paving and empty air but a row of ridiculously inadequate posts joined at the top by a guardrail. Tweede had found himself sweating slightly when the road suddenly turned in-

ward through a gap in the rocks and he found himself crossing this same meadow. The relief had been noticeable. Now he faced the same ordeal in the reverse direction.

His foot, never all that heavy on the accelerator, had relaxed, and he found himself slowing down. Come on, Tweede, let's get with it! he told himself. As he did so, he automatically glanced in the mirror just in time to see the red pickup emerge from the trees behind and bear down on him at what Tweede considered a reckless speed, given the nature of the road. Almost immediately, however, it slowed down. By now the Subaru had entered the defile leading to the gateway with the deep valley beyond. There was no shoulder to speak of, but Tweede relaxed his foot even further to allow the truck to pass before they both rounded the curve that would bring them out onto the cliff-hugging downgrade beyond. The truck, however, simply throttled down to a dawdle.

There was no room to stop, so Tweede gritted his teeth and drove on toward the curve and the vertiginous emptiness beyond. Another twenty feet and he would reach the curve. The truck was now quite close behind him. Suddenly, it picked up speed with a roar he could

hear even above the sound of the Subaru's own engine and bore frighteningly down upon him. Tweede hugged the right wall of the defile to allow plenty of room for the truck to pass, but it made no attempt to do so. Instead, it drew up behind him and with an almost gentle jar, began sweeping him into the curve straight toward the guardrail.

Instinctively, Tweede threw the wheel to the left and jammed his foot hard at the pedal. The Subaru swept around the curve and swung inward toward the cliff wall. The truck braked sharply, then picked up speed and bore down upon him again, nudging him on at a faster and faster pace. Tweede found himself shouting imprecations over his shoulder at the truck and realized that he was getting panicky. He tried to pull away, but the pickup was obviously much more highly powered than the Subaru. His only defense was to hug the left wall of the road and move as rapidly as he could.

Now the truck began a series of sharp nudges against the Subaru's right rear. Each nudge tended to swerve the smaller car into the wall of rock out of which the road had been carved. Tweede fought the wheel, overreacted, and the Su-

baru moved out into the center of the road, straddling the line. At once the truck switched tactics and began nudging the Subaru's left rear, forcing him farther and farther to the right toward the looming guardrail. Tweede swerved back across the left lane again toward the cliff.

Then, suddenly, the pressure let up. The truck braked and fell back into the right lane, leaving Tweede racing down the left lane of the road toward the somewhat sharper curve at the base of the downgrade. Another motorist had just rounded this curve and was starting up the road toward them. Tweede swerved back into the right lane and pushed the pedal to the floor. The Subaru shot down past the startled oncoming motorist, hit the curve with a screech that must have taken a year off the life of the tires, and rocketed around and into the shelter of the trees that bordered the road where it leveled out again. Luckily, the road was bare at this point.

The maneuver caught the pickup by surprise and gave Tweede a breather, but he knew it wouldn't last for long. On the far side of the curve a small dirt road led off the pavement and disappeared in a twisting climb up a tiny, snow-clogged canyon. Without think-

ing, Tweede took it and in a matter of seconds was around the first bend and out of sight. He heard the truck roar past the opening and continue down the paved road behind him, but he had no illusions that he had won. The Subaru was no match for the pickup. Very soon the truck would be back, hunting him out.

As he sat trying to get his breath back, he pondered what he might have done to bring on the attack. Were the punks who shot at him in his office somehow in league with the rich rancher from Vernal who had grinned maliciously at him on Main Street in Salt Lake? There'd been no hint of any connection at the trial. Damn Brady! He'd taken the man's word that the heat was off, and look where it had gotten him. And it wasn't over yet; Tweede had no illusions on that score. He was still some thirty miles from anything like a well-traveled highway and another forty miles from Salt Lake.

One thing: he couldn't just sit here and wait for the pickup to backtrack and hunt him down. He had no idea where the dirt track he was now on went, but it must go somewhere. It was obviously used enough to keep it from being overgrown with brush. There was even some slight evidence of maintenance.

He could see where some of the growth on either side had been trimmed back. Perhaps he could follow it up and . . . but that was foolish. In winter he doubted that it would be passable at higher elevations. He had come down quite a bit from the cabin to the paved road, and both the paved road and the opening to this dirt one were free of snow. He'd left no tracks turning into it. Even the short distance he'd come up, however, had brought him into snow again.

He'd have to move soon. The red pickup would quickly realize that he had turned off somewhere and would be coming back to look for him. And whoever it was behind the wheel would know the country a lot better than he did. Cautiously, Tweede backed the Subaru out of cover and down the grade to the paved road. Then, gritting his teeth, he turned to the right and headed back up the long curve that climbed the cliff face to the narrow defile above. He pushed the small car as hard as it would go. While on the face of the cliff, he was all too visible from below, should the red pickup return. He kept a lookout in the mirror and heaved a sigh of relief on reaching the defile. So far, so good.

According to the map, the paved road wound past the dirt

road leading to the cabin and eventually made its way down by another route to U.S. 40. It was a long way around, but he was prepared to take it. The road snaked its way along upland meadows, defiles, and stands of timber. On his left rose the peaks of the high Uinta mountains. On his right stood the lesser foothills and rolling uplands, screening the basin beyond with its string of towns. Tweede drove as fast as he dared, but he had the uncomfortable feeling that it wasn't fast enough. At any moment, he expected the red pickup to erupt from the trees behind him or come barreling around a curve. Somehow he knew it was only a matter of time.

So strong did the feeling grow that before he knew quite what he was doing, he had swung off the road and up a graveled side road that climbed higher into the mountains. The trail twisted and turned, and he was soon out of sight of the roadway. But not out of hearing. Within minutes, someone roared past his turnoff. He was willing to bet it was the truck.

The Subaru climbed higher into high country and came out into a shallow, upland, treeless valley. Under the trees the track had been relatively clear, but in the open, it was buried

under several feet of snow. He backed the car along the track under the trees, then pulled it out of sight behind some brush and started hiking. Abandoned shacks dotted the valley, the remains of small mining ventures of an earlier era. As he waded through the snow, two snowmobiles came surging up over a hill and started down toward the valley floor.

Tweede had moved some distance out into the valley. He headed toward the nearest of the shacks. As he floundered through the drifts, a small plane came over the eastern hills, circled lazily, then headed back east-southeast. The snowmobiles came into sight again, nearer this time, and Tweede edged inside the shack and watched them through a hole in one wall. There were three people on them, two young men and a girl, late teens or early twenties.

The snowmobiles moved swiftly across the valley toward the shack, and the stuttering roar of their motors grew louder. Finally they pulled up about a hundred feet from Tweede's shelter and throttled down.

"Hey! You in the shack. Better be careful. Those things can be dangerous. That one's set right over the opening to a

mine shaft," one of the young men called out.

Tweede stepped back from the hole in the wall, and the planks of the floor creaked alarmingly, then started to crack, and Tweede found one leg doubled under him and the other out of sight through a sudden gap in the floor.

"Help!" he cried.

The single rider scrambled down from his machine and came to the cabin door. "See what I mean?" he said. "Here, let me take some of the weight off your leg." Together, they managed to get Tweede's leg out of the trap and make it back to the doorway.

"What the hell are you doing up here all alone dressed like that? You hiding or something?" the other rider asked while the girl looked on curiously. "What's going on?"

Tweede shrugged. "I don't know what's going on," he said. "I've got a car parked behind some brush over there. Some guy in a red pickup tried to force me off a cliff back there..." he gestured toward the west "...and he's been chasing me ever since."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's crazy. I..."

The crack of a rifle and the zing of a near-miss brought them about, staring. The nose

of the red pickup jutted out of a narrow opening into the valley about forty degrees east of the track Tweede had driven up.

"Climb on," the single rider yelled. Tweede needed no further invitation, and the two snowmobiles shot away from the tottering shack and charged up a nearby hill, across the top and out of sight of the roadway.

"What about my car?" Tweede yelled. "It's a rental."

"You wanna live to pay for it, don't you?" the young man shouted back. "Hang on." Tweede nodded and hung on grimly.

The two machines circled around the valley, keeping the higher ground between themselves and the valley floor. Tweede lost all sense of direction as they whirled around and over small hills and through the drifts of snow. Finally, however, they pulled up at the edge of the valley where Tweede's tracks left the shelter of the trees and wandered out toward the derelict shack.

"Your car back in there?" the driver shouted over the throaty bark of the snowmobile engines. Tweede nodded. "Then I'd get out of here fast if I were you," the driver said.

"What about you, whoever you are?" Tweede asked.

"He can't follow us where we're going. You better light out, man."

Another shot and the ping of a bullet ricocheting off a nearby tree clinched the argument. Tweede slid to the ground and ran into the undergrowth. "Name's Rivers, Mel Rivers," the driver called after him. He heard the snowmobiles swell into thunderous life and hurtle off across the valley floor. Minutes later, he had pulled the Subaru out of the brush and onto the track and was bolting down toward the paved road again.

Once again he headed west, past the turnoff to Brady's friend's cabin and down the long, cliffside cut to the canyon floor below. He drove as fast as he dared. By this time it was dusk, and the farther he got toward the Utah Highway 87 intersection, the easier he breathed. He figured he had about another two miles, three at the most before he reached it.

He was on the last stretch, through another short canyon, when a flicker of lights in the mirror warned him that he was again being pursued. This was a narrow canyon, and a twisted one. Here and there it opened out into tiny pockets, heavily timbered, through which meandered a maze of intersecting

dirt roads buried in heavy brush, the kind that teens like to park on at night and engage in a little experimental petting. During the summer there would be campers and trailers strategically spotted here and there with campfires sending up plumes of smoke and kids scrambling up and down the rocks and chasing each other along the knotted roads. Now, of course, it was deserted. Tweede swung off the paved road and sought refuge in the tangle. He pulled the Subaru into a stand of trees, virtually invisible from any vantage more than ten feet away, and cut the engine. Immediately he could hear the snarl of the truck making its last descent into the pocket that housed the camp area. It was nearly dark now. Carefully he climbed from the car and burrowed into the brush, heading back toward the main road.

Before he had reached a point from which he could see anything, he heard the truck brake, then purr gently along the road as though sniffing out the scent of his retreat. As silently as he could, he pushed his way to the top of a small knoll and peered down at the roadway. The pickup was cruising slowly along the pavement, slowing almost to a stop at each opening into one of the many

tracks leading off into the trees. Fortunately, the weather had been dry for days, and the ground was hard and firm. If Tweede had left any tire marks, the driver would have to have gotten out and examined the ground up close to detect them.

Had he been spotted coming down the road into the little pocket, Tweede wondered. Did the driver know for sure that Tweede was really ahead of him, or was he simply playing all the angles?

The pickup had come to a stop, idling at the side of the pavement. Tweede slithered down the knoll through the undergrowth, trying to get as close to the road as he could without being seen. He could hear a mutter of voices. Two of them? But he'd have sworn there was only one, the driver, when the truck had tried to push him off the cliff. He wormed his way closer.

"...sure?" one voice said. "There's no sign..."

The second voice interrupted impatiently through a buzz of static and something else, a thrumming like a giant cat purring. It was hard to make out, small, metallic. "...went in. No doubt of it... lost sight of him under cover of the trees... hasn't come out. He's there."

A radio, of course. Tweede remembered seeing an antenna on the truck. It hadn't meant anything to him then. And there was the plane he had seen earlier, circling and glinting in the late sun. That hadn't meant anything to him, either.

Tweede pulled himself back deeper into the undergrowth. It was an instinctive movement. He knew he couldn't be seen from the air, and the truck was little more than a couple of patches of red showing through small gaps in the brush. The driver's words were no longer audible, but something of the timbre of his voice told Tweede the man was swearing fluently and violently. Then the truck lurched into motion, turned and headed off the pavement onto one of the tracks across the roadway, and disappeared among the trees, searching.

Tweede scrambled back to the Subaru, started the engine, and crept along the maze without lights, nearly blind in the darkness. Sometime the trail would have to come back to the paved road again. Even as he thought it, he rounded a turn and found himself at the edge of the pavement. Cautiously he cut the motor and listened. He could hear the pickup churning up and down the maze of lanes uphill of him. He started the engine again, eased out into

the pavement, still without lights, and shot out of the pocket and into the lower twists and turns of the narrow defile. Abruptly the walls of rock on each side gave way, and he found himself hurtling down a gentle grade toward Utah 87, a quarter of a mile ahead. He was in the open now. If the plane were still up there keeping watch, he could probably be seen, lights or no. He hit the switch, bore down on the intersection as hard as he could go, and swung onto the state highway in complete disregard of the stop sign and directly into the path of an oncoming semi and trailer. Fortunately, he was traveling even faster than the semi. Gauging the truck's speed carefully, he braked the Subaru slightly until he and the semi were traveling at about equal speed, then led the tiny procession the remaining eight miles or so into Duchesne, the county seat and district headquarters of the Utah Highway Patrol.

U.S. 40 is a well-traveled highway. In the broad light of day, Tweede felt no qualms about joining the traffic and heading back toward Salt Lake City. Montgomery offered to accompany him, but Tweede declined with thanks. He had

spent the morning telling Montgomery the story of his adventure, then retelling it over the phone to Brady.

"What I can't figure out," Tweede said, "is what brought it on in the first place."

"Being a city dude from Los Angeles, you probably wouldn't," Brady replied. "It sounds to me like you stumbled on an illegal hunt."

"A what?"

"The guy you saw shoot a deer did so out of season. That's a no-no. Howard Bell has got a fancy lodge up there beyond Mike Aaron's cabin, I hear. If that was his pickup you saw and if whoever was driving it deliberately tried to make an accident out of you, there's got to be something funny going on up there, and it sounds to me like it involves illegal hunting. It's not a new problem. It goes on all the time. But if Howard Bell's involved, it's got to be a big-time deal. It'll take some investigating, but illegal hunting's not the sort of thing one can hide once you know what to look for. I'll get the proper people to look into it. Lucky you got the snowmobiler's name. Hopefully, he'll be able to corroborate your story. You just get yourself back to Salt Lake. We'll need your evidence."

"I'm glad you're so concerned," Tweede replied.

"That, too," Brady said, and promptly disconnected.

The drive back to the city was pleasant and uneventful, but every red pickup Tweede spotted sent him into a sweat. He'd never realized just how many there were.

One morning some three months later, Tweede was on his way to appear in court in the trial of Howard Bell and Brett Browbridge on charges of attempted murder, to say nothing of systematically violating the game laws of the State of Utah for profit as well as fun. Brady's people had rounded up the operation, and Bell's connections in the legislature suddenly didn't know him any more. The portly man who had killed the stag pulled what strings he could, which were considerable, but he would stand in the dock along with Bell and Browbridge, the operators of the illegal hunt. It was Browbridge who had pursued him in the red pickup, and Tweede was looking forward to the morning in court. In fact, he was feeling pretty good.

He was maneuvering the old Aspen along downtown Main Street of Salt Lake City toward a parking spot against the curb between Fifth and Sixth South when, seemingly out of nowhere, a tiny Geo swung in from the center lane headed toward the same parking spot. Tweede gritted his teeth, trod the accelerator, and intercepted the Geo just as it was about to back into the space. The driver of the Geo glared at Tweede, and Tweede glared back. Then he began to move the Aspen forward, and the Geo decided that discretion was the better part of survival and made off. With a deep sigh of satisfaction, Tweede maneuvered the Aspen into the space, checked the traffic coming from the rear, then climbed out from behind the wheel.

"My town," he said aloud. A passing stranger glanced at him with raised eyebrows, then hurried on. Tweede shrugged and smiled. Somehow, for the first time since moving up from Los Angeles, he felt right at home.

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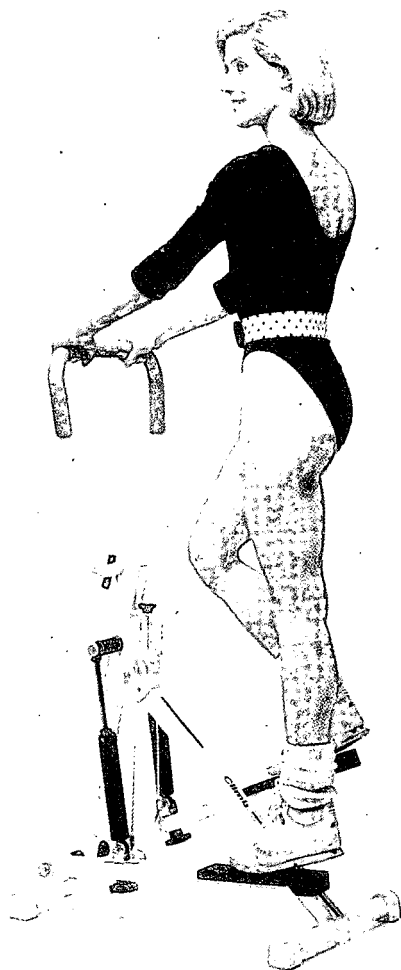
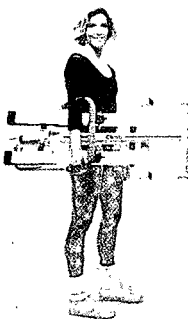
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The Photographic Miracle

by Ashley Curtis

Joe Masson moved to Anguillara in June of 1985. It seemed a viable alternative to Rome. It was not much farther from the school he worked at than his apartment in Trastevere had been—and he would not have to endure the horrendous pollution and impossible traffic of a city whose greatest monuments were rotting in acid rain. And there was a feeling of openness, of space in Anguillara—if not exactly on the little dirt street where the signora had her apartment, then at least a few minutes' walk away, where, standing in a square before a crumbling church at the top of the town, one looked out over the vast lake and breathed the air coming in fresh off the Sabatini hills. Joe had gone to this square every evening of his first week in the town and watched the swallows sweeping through the twilight. He looked down from the parapet at the lakeside promenade some forty meters below him with the steep, terraced gardens of a villa falling in between—a

villa that, he soon would learn, was called Le Rupi.

Anguillara belonged to a breed of town that didn't exist in America. There was a deep backwardness to it, something you felt in the crassness of the dialect, the lethargy of the fruit vendors, the cruddiness of the small fishing boats. In the middle of the night, when there was no traffic, you could drive from there to the center of Rome in thirty-five minutes, yet on a back street in Anguillara you might see a woman beheading hens, then hanging them up on her laundry rack to bleed; an old man leading a donkey with saddlebags woven of straw, held on by greasy leather straps that must have dated from the nineteenth century; a church with a p.a. system hooked up outside, broadcasting the service to the whole town on a Sunday morning, force-feeding religious noise. Madonnas, processions, funerals (so many funerals), handicapped beggars, and a slaughterhouse that stank when the wind blew wrong. An *anguilla* is an eel. Anguillara was the

eel town, named after the fatty snakelike fish served as a specialty in its small restaurants, where the television was always on too loud and the owner's children would run screaming through the dining rooms.

He had had to move away from Rome. He liked living in Italy (he told himself) because the people were so friendly, open, caring. Joe was not exactly a social type, however, and had never personally experienced this warmth and openness—but he liked to tell himself that it was all around. His acquaintances were the teachers, American, British, Australian, who worked at the American International School, and though he had once hooked up with a real Italian to share conversation (as the ad had put it), it had not worked out. And it worried him, in the back of his mind, that he was now moving out of a center of culture, hustle, commerce—where he had made no friends—into a place whose people were such an oddity to him, where the chance of finding companionship must have been almost less than anywhere else in the world.

It was thus a surprise and a relief when, on the day he moved into the small second floor apartment, sandwiched between the signora's garage

and her own flat, a timid young man knocked on the door. It turned out he was not so young: pudgy, with thinning hair, uncertain eyes, and a babylike face despite little patches of stubble that collected here and there. He spoke a polite, halting English, introducing himself as Matteo, the signora's son.

Joe learned several things about him rather quickly. He studied English literature at Rome University, was writing his thesis on an Indian writer with a long name (he was surprised that Joe had never heard of him), and he had lived all thirty-eight years of his life on the third floor of this building, with a mother who wanted him to get a job and had no appreciation for the finer matters of the intellect. He was going to finish his paper this year (he hoped) and then would move to Rome, "out of this hellhole," as he said, mincing his words in a weak sort of lisp between his lips and tongue. Joe invited him in for tea; they sat around the square wooden table in the almost bare, azure-tiled kitchen in which Joe had yet to cook a meal. Matteo talked on about his desire to visit America, perhaps live there one day; about how friendly, open, warm Americans all were with their simple kindness, their open-

door hospitality. Joe asked where the best stand was for buying vegetables, and if it would be possible to get a phone. Matteo replied that he felt fortunate to have an English speaker living right downstairs—the only English speaker in Anguillara, he said, living right below me. He smiled. His teeth were yellow, turning brown towards the gums.

Joe also felt fortunate to have a contact. He promised to help Matteo with the fine points of his dissertation. Matteo said the vegetables were much better in Rome.

By the end of September, Joe knew eight or nine people in Anguillara. He knew Matteo, the signora, the fat man and his daughter at the fruitstand on the corner, a couple of checkout girls at what was called a supermarket, a waiter, and a clerk with whom he'd had to register his residence. These people smiled at him when he entered their store or office, tried to speak slowly, with a less heavy dialect, for the first minute (after which they forgot their good intentions, and lapsed back into near unintelligibility), and even nodded to him when they passed him on the street.

He spent about an hour a week helping Matteo with his

paper. Matteo would then inevitably ask him up to dinner, and he would refuse, pleading three classes' worth of tests to correct. In truth, however, it was because he did not relish the signora's company. She was a very short old woman with beady, unpleasant eyes, greasy gray-brown hair, wrinkles that extended even to her lips, and a way of speaking that cut off words before they got anywhere near their proper ending. Unable to cope with "Joe," she called him Giuseppe, which she then shortened to Giusè. She loved to walk down the outdoor stairway from her landing to his while he was hanging out his wash. She would stand watching him stolidly, like one of those roundbased dolls weighted on the bottom so that you can never knock them down. She watched his every move intently until she caught him redhanded in some mistake; then she would launch into an incomprehensible explanation of why one had to hang up trousers by the cuffs, or dress shirts inside out, or underwear (and she would snatch his underwear off the line) with one pin, right directly in the middle of the crotch. Having seized this opening to begin a conversation, she would go on to talk about the latest funeral, the corruption of politicians,

the unfairness of her pension, the tragedy of her late husband's death ("who built this very house, and the other one, too, with his own hands"), the uselessness of Matteo's studies, his failed efforts to rent the "other house," and finally, the wickedness of her immediate neighbor—all usually in that order—before jumping on his next mistake. One day, however, she waddled down the steps so wide-eyed, startled, almost glowing that he wondered what conceivable sin he could have committed with a clothespin to upset her so. She launched into a story, without even bothering about the laundry, that he could only make out bits and pieces of. It was completely wild, nothing like the litany of complaints she usually ran through. It had to do with a prostitute, with drowning, with not drowning, with a knife, a body, eels, police, this morning. Joe had no idea what to make of it, and replied that it was surely terrible. She was not happy with that and, almost bursting with dammed up, frustrated communication, her round face red, her fat hands clutching at his sleeve, she pulled him up the stairs and into her apartment. "Mattè!" she yelled when just inside the door. Matteo slouched into the kitchen, and

while she nervously made coffee, he argued with her that it was unseemly to get so excited by this. It was not an omen, and it didn't mean that she would be the next to die ("But there are so many funerals this year," she said, "it isn't natural."), and as they argued, he filled Joe in about the woman, apparently a Roman prostitute, who had washed ashore down by the promenade the night before and been discovered by a fisherman in the early morning. She had been in the water a long time (or so they said) and had not drowned but had been stabbed to death. No one knew any more so there was nothing more to say, he said, glaring angrily at his mother, who crossed herself before pouring the coffee and then said, for what seemed the hundredth time, "*Ahimé!* The poor, sad, fallen woman. She was raped, raped and killed—"

"She was a prostitute," Matteo objected.

"Raped and killed, right under our own eyes, here in Anguillara. Washed ashore to the fishermen to call them to their sins. It will be a bad year—" and she stared intently, stupidly, at Joe "—no good will come of this . . ." It took over an hour for Joe to extricate himself from her hysteria, by which time the shock of the news had

long worn off and he felt more relief at getting away from her than horror about her story. And yet, safely downstairs, he told himself he didn't really mind her absurd chatter, just as he didn't mind correcting Matteo's horrible written English. He was gaining insight into a culture, he told himself. He was meeting real people, real Italian people, people no tourist would ever get to know. A slice of life, he liked repeating to himself. A slice of life.

Then he met Angelo.

It was not long after the woman washed up on the beach, and still before midterm exams, for Joe was wondering as he walked from school to the bus stop how he would ever get to complex numbers before October twenty-fourth. A yellow VW bug, blocked in the chaotic traffic, honked once, honked twice, and magically opened its passenger side door. A voice yelled out in Brooklynese, "Need a ride?"

Joe was so used to assuming himself anonymous that it took him several seconds to realize he was being spoken to. At first he turned around, looking for the person next to him who must have needed the ride. But the voice caught him. "Yeah, you!" and he stared at a face that he had never seen be-

fore—rugged, dark, its few wrinkles etched very deeply, covered with unkempt, slightly curly black hair that was flamboyantly going gray in several directions.

"You want a ride? Anguil-lara, right?"

Joe nodded. "Sure." He took his knapsack off and squeezed himself into the little car. The traffic began moving just as he got in.

"I'm Angelo. I've seen you around a few times. You work here?" He tossed his head backward, in the general direction of Joe's school.

"Yes," Joe said.

"I work at Our Lady," Angelo said. "Just down the road—you know it."

"The girls' school."

"Girls' boarding—a few boys as day students. Yeah, I saw you around, a couple of times. Heard your accent. Wondered what you do, but didn't bother asking. You couldn't have been expected to pick me out." He laughed, revealing an abundance of bright gold fillings on the insides of his teeth.

"Yeah," Angelo said. "I teach biology." He was a big man and drove strongly, as if he were turning and braking the little car with his own applied strength, without the help of German engineering.

Joe asked him if he lived in Anguillara.

"Four years," Angelo said. "Yeah, my relatives are from there. They're gone now—I never saw them. Born and raised in New York. So, yeah, I came back to my roots. It's not a place you're likely to just pick out of the air."

He laughed. They were outside the ring road now and drove at a good pace as the apartment complexes thinned out and fields of wheat and corn, outlined by clear rows of umbrella pines, came more and more prominently into view.

"Yeah, it's a nice place, Anguillara. I'm glad to be there. My wife—" he paused significantly—"is of another opinion. She's pregnant. She gets depressed sometimes. A lot. I don't know if it's me or Anguillara or the baby—I don't know. She's a dancer."

"I'm sorry," Joe said.

"Oh, it's all right," Angelo said. "It's okay. It's just—she gets depressed. She's Italian—real Italian, with a passport and all. She got pregnant—we got married. Some people are traditional, you know. Don't rock the boat."

"I know," Joe said.

"So like I say, she gets depressed sometimes. It's a downer sometimes. I stay at school late, working in the lab."

"Experiments," Joe said.

Angelo laughed again. "No, not that lab. I stay out of there as much as I can. Let the lab assistant handle it. You know what the classes are good for? I'm kidding you, you see, I teach them well—but what they're good for, if you follow me, is, for example, Japanese pears. You ever seen those big—monsters, I mean, big as a melon—these big pears? Sweet, succulent—or those candies from Holland that melt in your mouth? It's great, an international school. I drop little hints—especially with the Asians—and sure enough, next week a little present's waiting for me. No, I meant the photo lab. That's where I spend a lot of time."

"Developing?"

"Printing, blowing up—I'll show you. My house is plastered with them. Where do you live, anyway? I'm just outside the town. Isolated. Nice, old place—view of the lake where it curves back, you know. You doing something now? You could see it, see some pictures, too."

They turned off on a gravel driveway a few hundred meters before town. Joe had never noticed it before; it curved quickly behind a row of cypress trees, giving the impression that it was just a widening of the em-

bankment. The house was small, one story, probably built only twenty years before but in the manner of the old houses with red tile roof, pale orange intonaco, tall windows with dark green shutters. It stood alone between a hedged-in, disused field and a low, brambly wood; behind it the grass sloped gently down and then dropped off, and past the dropoff one could see the hindmost inlet of the lake, the road to Trevignano curving back, and then the reeds surrounding the beginning of the aqueduct that led to Rome.

Angelo led him inside, swinging open the doors as he blustered his way through the vestibule.

"It's nice," he said.

The furniture was ramshackle; the rooms were small. A faded couch, some bookshelves, and a wooden table with six chairs around it sat uncomfortably just inside the door. Joe glanced into what must have been the bedroom: a huge mattress, covered with a bright quilt, lay directly on the floor. The place had a rawness to it, the feeling that it contained someone powerful, who flung doors open, someone who, when he sat, for example, on a couch, would make the couch take notice of him. But the walls attracted Joe's attention

most: they were covered with photographs of all sizes, thumbtacked carelessly onto wherever there had been free spaces—or not so free, for many of them overlapped and thus were partly hidden. Joe chose a wall to examine and walked up to it. Many of the photos had a grainy brown tint, often with blurred, oval edges, so that they looked like pictures taken early in the century. The subjects matched—they were scenes of backward Italian life, the scenes that surprised one so often in Anguillara or in so many of the isolated towns in Lazio—Tolfa, Sasso, Civitella Cesi: a peasant leading a water buffalo out to a field, a mule pulling an ancient wooden-wheeled cart, women collecting sticks, carrying them in oversized bundles on their backs. There were also portraits of women in old fashioned dresses and hats, sometimes holding canes. And then Joe realized that they were all the same woman: young, apparently quite beautiful, with long dark hair and a troubled smile.

"My wife," Angelo said. He turned his back on Joe and walked through the open door into the kitchen. "Mineral water? Some wine? Beer?"

Joe accepted a beer. Angelo yanked the cap off a bottle of Peroni, poured himself a glass

of mineral water, and came back into the living room.

"Depends on the chemicals, the paper," he said, holding out the fat brown bottle for Joe to take. "It's just combinations. But it's what I like about it." He pointed to a shot of an old aproned woman, raking in hay with a broad, flat wooden rake. "Looks like it was a hundred years ago. You know why? Because it's brown, it's grainy—not the subject. The subject has to go along, all right—necessary but not sufficient, if you know what I mean. I could have done that one on high-contrast paper, using any cheap developer, and given you a clear, sharp, action shot that you would instantly have said was 1983. Exact same shot. You learn after a while that you can make things look like what they're not. I can fool you entirely with a photograph. And you know why?"

Joe swallowed a mouthful of the sour beer. He shook his head, looking into the kitchen at the ancient refrigerator, cream colored, with rounded edges.

"Because it's a photograph," Angelo said. "And we've been brainwashed into thinking photographs are real. Or we've brainwashed ourselves. But they aren't real.

"The Photographic Miracle," he said, and chuckled. "Someone said that. I don't remember who.

"My wife," he then said, gesturing with a rough finger at a small, oval-shaped portrait, just the face.

"Look at that," he said. "Could you look at that and think she gets depressed? What's to be depressed in that?"

Joe's eyes wandered over to the bookcase. Prominent, well-worn, on the bottom shelf—a fat paperback. *The Joy of Sex* leapt to his eyes. Next to it *The Hite Report*. Masters and Johnson. A fat tome, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. A whole shelf of sex.

Joe said he had to go. He had a lot of homework to correct. Angelo offered him a ride, but he refused. It was only a short walk.

"As you like it," Angelo said, and shrugged. "Too bad my wife wasn't here. She'd like to meet you." He looked at his watch. "She has a dancing lesson now. Giving one, I mean. To little kids. We can go watch her once."

They started walking towards the door. Then an idea seemed to strike him, and he stopped.

"Say, look. You said you don't know many people here."

Joe didn't remember having said this; he supposed Angelo had read it in his eyes. "I'll have you over one night. There's a little community here in Anguillara, English speakers. You didn't know that? We're not the only ones. A couple of teachers from St. George's, and then a journalist of some sort—and you've heard of the Maxwells. No?" He laughed. "At least you know Le Rupi."

Joe nodded. He still went a couple of times a week at sunset to watch the swallows and admire the lake over Le Rupi's terraced gardens.

Angelo smiled. "Then you know Maxwell," he said. "British millionaire. He owns Le Rupi."

Joe's scalp slowly began to tingle. As he walked out the driveway he had a vision of himself at the doorway of Le Rupi, shaking hands with a whitehaired, friendly, portly fellow in a blue blazer, with money written all over the carefully tended skin of his pale face. Then he looked back, once, at the small house. Angelo stood in the open doorway, leaning against the sill on one large shoulder, glass of mineral water in his hand, staring back at Joe. He looked like he was contemplating something, and Joe, called back to reality by

the pine needles beneath his feet, wondered what it was. But he did not wonder for long. He was enjoying the rush of excitement that kept washing over his body, the feeling of exhilaration that he felt at hooking up, making connections. He was finally hitting his stride. In the company of this Italian American, the slice of life he was enjoying here in Anguillara seemed to have enlarged considerably.

"Le Rupi?" Matteo repeated. He looked wistfully at the typewritten sheet of paper on the desk, marked up with red ink. He tore his gaze from it and looked across the table at Joe. "People don't much talk about it any more."

"They talked about it once?" Joe prodded.

Matteo looked at him and twisted his nostrils.

"It was bought out several years ago," he finally said. "The people were not happy. It was bought by foreigners."

He stared dejectedly at the sheet in front of him.

"What's wrong with this?" he asked.

Joe leaned over wearily.

"You need the simple past. It's a habit, a repeated action. You should remember that."

Matteo leaned back in his chair.

"Lots of foreigners buy buildings," Joe suggested. "Why so much talk about it?"

Matteo screwed up an eye and looked at him, then evidently decided to talk.

"For a long time, you see, Le Rupì was our aristocracy. It belonged to the Scaccia family since medieval times. It was a status matter for the whole town, having the Scaccias living in Le Rupì. I think it is ridiculous. We have moved beyond feudalism, after all. But to have a Scaccia in Le Rupì gave the whole town the illusion of nobility.

"Can you say that?" he asked suddenly.

Joe assured him that it was all right.

"Many people were upset. Le Rupì in the hands of Germans. You have to understand, we are still careful about Germans here. When you go down to St. Peter's, just look at the parking lot, packed full of deluxe German buses—and the language of the square is German, not Italian. I can understand it, too. But no one knows who owns it now. If you believe the talk, it is a German or an Englishman or a Brazilian—or the Mafia. So many people drive up there with foreign license plates, park their cars outside the church, and go into Le Rupì. None of them is with

the town. I think it is the fault of the town, though—no one will accept them. I don't know who is there. And if you ask my mother, she will say it is the devil.

"Repeated action. You are right." He clucked his tongue inside his mouth, shaking his head. "I still have trouble with this language."

But Joe wasn't listening. He was thinking that in two days' time he would be eating dinner with the Clark brothers, and April Miller . . . and the Maxwells. The English-speaking community of Anguillara, of whose existence Matteo didn't even seem to be aware.

Joe arrived at seven o'clock. The table was elegantly set for eight. Angelo was in the kitchen, tasting a red sauce from a flat wooden spoon.

"So, you've arrived. Let's hope you're not the last." Angelo fought for a moment with a drawer, got it out, removed a garlic press. He squeezed it easily through two small cloves and watched appreciatively as it dripped its juice into the sauce. "A beer? Come here—" the garlic press clattered on the counter "—I want to show you something."

Angelo led him to a desk in the small bedroom. Joe felt the

presence of the woman he had not yet seen: a silky bathrobe hung from the knob of a closet; a pair of small black high-heeled shoes peeked out from underneath the bed; a bra hung carelessly from a standing lamp. The air smelled flowery. Angelo sat down at the desk and sorted through a stack of photographs until he found one he was looking for. He placed it on the desk in front of Joe.

"Recognize that?"

It was an uninteresting shot—a tall hedge lining a sidewalk, backed up by a wire fence. Two boys were walking towards the left, one of them carrying a soccer ball, the other wearing a baseball cap. Joe was about to say no when something about the one boy struck him. Suddenly he recognized the spot: it was the sidewalk in front of the International School.

"Yes, I do," he said. "I know one of those kids."

"And this?" Angelo asked triumphantly.

The new picture startled him. He felt confused, fragile. He didn't know how to react.

"How did you get that?" he said.

"Click!" Angelo was suddenly even bigger than Joe remembered. His big lips could barely handle a little sound

like "click"—they left it dull, frighteningly flat.

The same two boys were in the picture but shifted farther to the left so that one saw the gate admitting entrance to the school. Stepping out of the gate, glancing over at the gatekeeper, was Joe himself.

"It shocks you, doesn't it?" Angelo said. He waited, watching Joe intently. "Seeing yourself like that. Weren't you a little shocked?" He grabbed the stack of pictures and threw them onto a pile at the back of the desk. He was grinning devilishly at Joe. "You want that beer?"

He led the way back to the kitchen, picked up the wooden spoon again.

"When did you take it?"

"A couple days ago. Grab a beer from the fridge. Whatever kind you want."

Joe obliged but only found Peroni's. There were seven or eight of them in a neat line, along with various uncovered bowls containing leftovers, a plate with the last remnants of a stick of butter on it, and a slab of fish, badly covered with plastic wrap, that was in the process of turning brown. He took one of the beers and closed the door.

"It's an experiment," Angelo said. "I wanted to test some-

thing out on you. I hoped you wouldn't mind."

"It's okay," Joe said quickly. He sucked his breath in quietly. He did not want Angelo to see how uncomfortable he felt. He wondered where his wife was. He wondered when the Maxwells and the others would be showing up.

"I'm going to tell you how you felt," Angelo said. He took the wooden spoon out of the pot and licked it clean. Joe put his hands into his pockets, then felt awkward, and took them out again.

"You felt guilty."

Joe sipped coolly at his beer. He swallowed, looked Angelo in the eye.

"Yes," he said. "You're right."

"Hah!" Angelo exclaimed. He turned down the heat under the sauce. "Come outside with me a second. I want to talk about this with you."

Joe looked at his watch as he followed Angelo out the door.

"Are these people always so late?" he asked.

"That's what I want to talk to you about," Angelo said. But he didn't say anything further, and they walked in silence around the back of the house, then across the lawn until it started to drop down towards the lake. There was no moon, and it was hard to see where

they were stepping—Joe had to trust in the evenness of the lawn and stumbled twice. Angelo was surefooted. The air was warm. At first he did not see the lake, and only felt an empty cavity in front of him; then a car's headlights appeared around a corner on the other side, and their reflection in the water revealed small waves that broke the black into brief, moving pieces.

"Hard to know the lake's there," Angelo finally said. "You just feel there's a kind of abyss, but you don't know what it is."

They were silent again; then the sound of a siren, a *carabinieri* Alfa, rose quickly in the sky and died.

"That photograph made you feel guilty," Angelo said. "Do you have anything to feel guilty about?"

"I mean," he added quickly, "I watched you as you left the gate. You came from the faculty room—you nodded at the gatekeeper—you crossed the street to the bus stop, pushed your way onto the bus, and you were off. I assume you hadn't just murdered an infant in the kindergarten or tipped off the gatekeeper about state secrets. Correct me if I'm wrong."

"No," Joe said. "No, it was a relatively innocent moment of my life."

"Exactly. So why did you feel guilty when you saw the photograph?"

Joe shrugged. He didn't know what to say, didn't know what Angelo was getting at. He looked at his watch. The lake was black again, or nonexistent.

Angelo went on for him.

"Rationally, you might think something like this: if he was taking pictures of me then, then maybe he was taking pictures of me when I did worse things, things I really am guilty of.

"But that's a poor excuse. I think you know that I don't follow you and photograph you everywhere you go. I did it once, as an experiment. And second, I doubt that you are guilty of anything I might have photographed—I don't see you, frankly, guilty of much more than what we all are guilty of, bad thoughts, bad words. Nothing much to photograph."

"I suppose," said Joe.

"So you felt guilty over nothing rational—the photograph itself produced generic, innate guilt in you. You agree? Remember that. Let's go back to the house. Maybe our guests are there."

Joe left the lake with a strong sense of relief.

"Now, what do you suppose," Angelo went on as they walked

back, "would have happened if you *had* been walking through that gate after a dreadful crime. What would you have felt then, if you just felt guilty about nothing?"

"What do you mean?"

Angelo stopped and smiled, standing in front of Joe with his hands in his pockets. For a moment he did not seem threatening, seemed earnest, almost like a little boy.

"Okay," he said. "Suppose you *had* just killed some teaching assistant in the teachers' room—and no one was around. You walked out calmly as if nothing had happened, nodded at the gatekeeper, got on the bus. The picture gives no indication that you had done anything—and yet this time you have done something terrible."

"I would be scared," Joe said. "I would assume you knew. Otherwise—why the photograph?"

"Exactly," said Angelo curtly. He pushed open the door of the house. "Miranda?" he called. But there was no answer.

"Out dancing," he said. "Sit down, sit down." He motioned to the couch. The emptiness of the house screamed at Joe. "I'll just check this sauce, put on the water. You need another beer?"

Joe didn't yet. He sat on the couch and stared at the table

set for eight. The china matched, the napkins were green cloth, two wineglasses accompanied each place. But with Miranda, since that was her name, there would be nine. And where did he get these fancy table settings? It did not seem in character.

"Isn't Miranda coming?" he asked. But Angelo didn't hear, or didn't answer.

"Isn't Miranda coming?" He said it louder.

"What?" Angelo called out.

Joe repeated his question. Angelo looked around the doorjamb.

"I don't think so," he said. "She's dancing. But you never know."

Joe's head felt prickly. He was not comfortable. He had assumed that by this time he would be eating olives, chewing on little balls of mozzarella, maybe with a highball in his hand, talking to Mrs. Maxwell, or April Miller. He had never seen these people, but they occupied an already exalted position in his mind. They belonged to a secret expatriate community to which he also wanted to belong. No one at school knew any of them. And the obvious luxury of Le Rupì added to his curiosity—he was already wondering when he would see the inside of the villa. But in the empty spaces, it seemed incon-

ceivable that they would ever materialize. He waited, staring vacantly at three-by-five Mirandas plastered on the walls.

Angelo brought a large, loudly decorated dish onto the table.

"Are you sure you told them the right time?" Joe asked. And then he was suddenly sure of something, and it brought his good mood back: it was a surprise party. They had all slipped into the house while he and Angelo had been by the lake—of course: why else had Angelo led him out there? They were all about to jump out from closets, under beds, behind the sofa . . . he would pretend he hadn't guessed . . .

Angelo put the dish down gently on the table.

"The fact is," he said slowly, "the fact is that they aren't going to come."

Joe's face went hot.

"Why didn't you tell me that before?" he asked. "What's all this?" He gestured to the places at the table. "Is this some kind of game?"

"I wasn't sure," Angelo said. "And so I even set their places. I really wasn't sure. But it's much too late now. They're not going to come."

He took up a big spoon and started transferring green tortelloni to Joe's plate.

"But don't be angry," he said. "It's more interesting this way. For you, too. We can go back to my experiment."

He served himself, then poured Chianti into both their glasses.

"Bon appetit," he said, stabbing the dripping pasta with his fork. He raised his eyes to Joe and smiled. He took a bite. He sipped his wine. He took another bite. Then he paused, put down his fork.

"You know about the woman in the lake?"

Joe nodded.

"I saw it happen."

He said it calmly, matter-of-factly. He took another bite of the pale dumplings, dripping red.

"You saw her wash up?" Joe said. He was staring at his glass of wine.

"No," Angelo smiled. "I saw her get dropped in."

He took another bite and chewed it over slowly, his big lips meandering through the motions.

"And Maxwell knows it now. That's why he didn't come."

Joe did not eat that night. His fear had left him suddenly, without his noticing, and was replaced by fascination, by an almost physical thrill. He sat mesmerized and listened to this New York Italian describe a scene he almost recognized

from movies. How he had fallen asleep in his car parked outside the lakeside bar, early on the morning of September fifth. How he had chanced to wake up and look blearily out of the windshield, had been about to doze again when he had realized what the image was that had impinged upon his consciousness; had reopened his eyes to see a man carrying a human body, laying it in a boat behind a group of hedges, disappearing behind the hedges himself, and reemerging past them, rowing the boat peacefully towards the middle of the empty lake. He had known instantly that it was Maxwell: he walked just like Maxwell; he was the same size; he even wore the hat that only Maxwell wore—a strange three-cornered thing like Paul Revere's. Did Joe know what he meant?

Joe was digesting this in lieu of tortelloni, modifying his picture of the British millionaire, excusing all of Angelo's strange behavior.

"Did you go to the police?"

"Hah!" Angelo smiled. "Of course that was my first idea. I had the feeling, you see, that there was something very wrong. But as I tried to keep myself awake by going over what I had just seen, I realized several things. First of all, what I had seen was nothing. A

man carried a woman to a boat and rowed out into the lake. Romantic, no? So what? Her body didn't wash up till the thirtieth, you know. No, I would have been laughed out of the office if I'd told it then.

"So then the body did wash up. I wasn't really surprised—me and Maxwell were, I guess, the only ones who weren't surprised. So there I had my confirmation, but what did I have objectively? Nothing. Even if someone believed that what I'd seen had something to do with it, all I had seen was a dark figure carrying something to a boat. A hundred meters away, no moon—myself blind drunk and passed out in my car as anyone else in the bar that night would testify. The three-cornered hat a trick of shadows or suggestion—and even if it was believed, it would be nowhere close to evidence that it was Maxwell.

"And then there's one more thing. Le Rupi, you know, is almost a town monument—it's the soul of the town. Maxwell *bought* it. Money carries power in a depressed little place like Anguillara. Even if I had seen Maxwell, point blank, from two meters in broad daylight, it wouldn't be anything his money couldn't get around. And no one's willing to do battle for a prostitute.

"Okay, I thought. Don't go to the police. But in the interests of justice, something might be done. And if the interests of justice happened to match with my own—and maybe yours—that was a nice coincidence. Or don't you think?"

He smiled winningly. He poured some Corvo Bianco in Joe's second glass, frowned at the empty plates on the table.

"That's why I showed you the photograph tonight. That's why I had this dinner party." He laughed, and gestured at the empty places.

"You see, I tested him," he went on. "On the invitation that I sent him—yes, I sent him, sent them all, small invitations—very useful in experiments—I asked if they would come to dinner, but also to a special presentation. Here, let me show you one."

He moved back his chair, half stepped over it, and tramped into his bedroom. He came back with a small rectangular yellow card.

PLEASE COME TO DINNER
Nov. 7th, 7:30, at Angelo's.
*Where a certain mystery
will be explained,
bearing on the evening
of Sept. 5th.*

Angelo smiled mischievously. "Would you have come?" he asked.

"I'm going to blackmail the sucker," he said with a vengeance. "I'm going to blackmail him for all he's worth."

He stopped and considered, scratching his badly shaven chin.

"No, I'm not," he said. "Not for all he's worth. Just a tiny fraction of it. That's enough for me, and it won't get his goat so much. I'm not interested in dying, either."

He smiled at Joe, his big purple lips parting slightly.

"But I need you."

Keep your cool, Joe said to himself. Keep your cool. Later, quietly, in peace, he would decide exactly where he stood. For now—noncommittal, hear him out, don't upset him, and get out as soon as possible. He had the uncomfortable sensation that Maxwell must be listening, had spies, had bugged the house—that each minute he stayed increased the danger he was in.

"You see, you're Maxwell's build," Angelo said. "In a dark coat, fifteen meters, with a Paul Revere hat on—he'd never know it wasn't him."

"What do you mean?"

"I want to take your picture," Angelo said, leaning forward on the table towards him, his big, hard-etched, darkskinned face exuding power that Joe feared and envied. "Down by Le

Rupi, near the dock, a moonless night. That's all you have to do. I'll make a deal with you—for cash. More cash than you've ever dreamed of—for not the slightest trace of danger. I'll do all the rest."

"I don't understand," Joe said, "why all the others didn't come. I see why Maxwell didn't—but the others—"

"They're all his toadies," Angelo said impatiently. "No guts to do anything he doesn't approve. He told them not to come."

"And your wife?"

"My wife," he said, "is dancing." He smiled a tremendous smile. "She dances." He winked at Joe. "Sometimes she gets depressed."

Joe sat dreamily at the old wooden table that served as his desk, looking out the window into the neighbor's back terrace. Matteo was half an hour late—unusual for him. He almost always arrived too early. But Joe had little thought for Matteo. He had not seen Angelo since the miraculous—or absurd—proposition he had made three days before.

Joe considered himself to have a high moral sensibility. He was not proud of it—he regarded it, rather, as a handicap. He found himself too little

capable of having good, spontaneous fun, fun he imagined every other person to enjoy—and he traced this deficiency to his continual questioning of what was the “right,” the “moral” thing to do. Intellectually, he did not believe that there *was* a right thing to do, a moral way to live. And yet he knew that, for example, he had become a teacher and remained one partly because it was a “good” profession; there was something in him that would never have allowed him to become a businessman, an entrepreneur, a corporate lawyer, or a stockbroker; there was a piece of him that consoled him by saying that, however boring, however useless and unprestigious it was to be a teacher, it was still a profession that renounced glory and devoted itself to helping others. The fact was that he didn’t believe his math classes helped anyone to lead a better life, didn’t believe the bright kids could really profit more from him than from the next guy, didn’t believe the stupid ones could ever be helped, nor that polynomial functions would ever be of any value to the vast majority of them—still, it was a selfless activity, serving mankind’s greater good, and he was part of it: and part of him was proud of this. And he resented this part of

himself because it held him paralyzed, mediocre, bored.

He was both fascinated by and afraid of Angelo’s offer. It meant excitement, daring—it meant seizing life, a step away from the paralysis he felt himself caught in. And the money would set him free, for a time, to discover more about himself than just which elements of calculus he’d never really grasped. On the other hand, it was probably not the right thing to do. It was blackmail. It was illegal. It profited from another’s misfortune—from another’s death, another’s murder! And yet... Matteo still had not arrived. Joe checked his watch to be sure it was actually Friday, for he had been absentminded lately. He couldn’t find, anywhere, the monogrammed tie clip that his mother had given him just before she died. He had spent so long looking for it the previous morning that he had missed the bus and had arrived an hour late at school. Then he went to classes with the wrong books. He forgot to correct assignments; he had arrived in a classroom of expectant, nervous students, had sensed something was wrong, had opened up his book to the next lesson—“Mr. Masson, what about the test?” And yet, he reflected, staring across at the massive old woman on the

balcony opposite, beating a tiny, shabby carpet with a wicker carpetbeater—yes, it was Friday—and yet it was perhaps not wrong at all. Most people would agree, he thought, that a man should be punished for a crime, especially murder. If it wasn't going to happen through the normal channels, was it not right to go outside them? It might make Maxwell think twice, besides, before he did something like that again, which would surely benefit humanity. The argument seemed compelling. As for the money, clearly a couple of hundred thousand dollars was nothing to a man who owned a place like Le Rupì. It wouldn't actually hurt him at all while it would help Joe out immensely. Surely money served the world better by doing good than not? And Joe himself was safe from everything. Angelo would do all the dealing, never even mention Joe's existence—in fact, he couldn't, since Joe was the one thing Maxwell shouldn't hear about. All he had to do, in fact, was to pose for a photograph, wearing a heavy black overcoat and a strange tricornered hat. The only conceivable danger would arise if Maxwell saw them doing it. It was essential to be sure that he was out of town. But then what could go

wrong? In the early morning, all Anguillara sleeping, they would climb over the fence into the terraced gardens of Le Rupì. Joe would walk down the steps, wrapped up in Maxwell's peculiar garb. Angelo would snap shots, from top to bottom. Then they would go out the gate, which opened from the inside, out onto the promenade. Angelo would take a couple more shots, if no drunk fishermen were around. They would get into his car and drive away. And there Joe's part would end.

And if it didn't work?

Life would go on. He would finish another year of calculus, Algebra II, geometry. Some kids would graduate. But perhaps the excitement of actually doing something real would wake him up, give him direction, show him how to get out... and there was no danger.

He heard a car start up outside, "putt-putt," shift into gear, drive off. Maybe he would buy a car...

Matteo still had not arrived. Joe stood up, stretched.

He was startled, suddenly, by the thought that he had left the kettle on, intending to make tea...

But in the kitchen all was quiet. He heard the pacing of slipped feet upstairs: that

was Matteo. The signora had a more deliberate, plodding, heavy walk, and her slippers clacked on the stone floor.

Joe stared out the french window in the kitchen. Outside, a mother was screaming the name of her son. "Roberto!" It was loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. "Roberto!" She screamed it over and over again, ruthlessly.

Joe suddenly relaxed and smiled. He liked the fact that she was screaming, unabashed, loud enough to grate on everybody's ears. Good for her, he thought. Scream on, lady. Dare to scream.

On Tuesday morning Angelo came by with the three-cornered hat and a heavy black woolen coat. Joe had taken one of his "personal days" off from school. They stood on the landing outside Joe's apartment and looked across at the pale yellow concrete of the building next door. Angelo said that he would be out late, in Rome, arranging things. They would meet later, at the church.

"You're sure that Maxwell won't come back?" Joe asked again.

Angelo laughed. His ironic smile, something like a leer, twisted his jagged face.

"He's in Switzerland. Don't worry. He's in a *hospital*. His liver. Next time it will be his heart."

He laid a heavy hand over Joe's shoulder. The hand was broader than the shoulder, more substantial.

"Don't worry," he said. "The most you'd be doing is trespassing, anyway. And he's not there."

He winked with assurance and started down the stairs.

"Two o'clock," he said. "Two o'clock and fifty grand."

Joe stared across at the empty building. He heard Angelo's VW start up, heard it spitting loose stones as it churned down the dry dirt road, which was supposed to have been paved two months ago.

He went back into the apartment, leaving the door open. He walked into the bathroom, stared into the bathtub full of Brooks Brothers white shirts, and sighed. He began to wring them out, one by one, and toss them into a red plastic basket. There was something particularly lonely about doing laundry in a bathtub, especially when it was one's own.

He could still change his mind.

He could show up at the church, give Angelo back his hat and coat, and say he couldn't do it. It wasn't right.

Or maybe he just didn't feel like it.

He could find a flaw in the plan and prove that it was not worth following—only he couldn't find a flaw. He had lain awake last night, trying this tack, and had been unsuccessful. He remembered how the photograph had made him feel. And if he had just murdered somebody . . .

He carried the basket out onto the landing. As he stepped outside, he jumped and uttered a little yelp. The signora was standing just outside the door, against the wall, as if she had been eavesdropping. That was ridiculous, he thought: eavesdropping on somebody who was alone. He did not usually like seeing her, but this time, once he got over the shock, he was not unhappy for the company. Her simplicity, her lack of intelligence, her backwardness, all emphasized the fact that there were other realities than those of blackmail, danger, the firm grasps and knowing eyes of Angelo. Her accent, for once, refreshed him. She started talking on about a picnic, how she had gone on a picnic, a surprise present from her sister and Matteo, for her birthday. She described the grapes, the bread, sitting under a tree, with water buffalo grazing in the field; and how they had sur-

prised her, hadn't told her where they were taking her; and how her brother-in-law had kissed her on both cheeks, and they had taken pictures, and she had drunk some wine, and had been feeling silly, and didn't even mind the pictures, although usually—and she stood squarely before him, eyes no higher than his collarbone, her wide skirt hanging stolid, unmoved, seemingly unmovable by any breeze—usually she was convinced the devil hid inside the camera, that if you let yourself be taken you were giving up a fraction of your soul to hell. She stopped to point out that the sleeves should be pulled inside out, and then to explain why, when Joe asked her about Matteo and why he hadn't come to their last meeting.

Oh, he is a poor sick one, she said, but sick in the head, sick with his ideas of no use, with his ambition, his rejection of the life of work for one of laziness. And always asking her for money, always wondering why she couldn't sell the second house his father built, himself with his own hands, in order to provide her with an income for her old age . . . and the pension is not half enough, and it's disgraceful how they make you wait, for hours sometimes, at the post office, on the first Mon-

day of the month—and she should sell it, now? So that he can go to Rome and sit in cafes and pretend to be an intellectual? Joe pulled the shirt-sleeves inside out and stared across at the blank wall and listened to the rasping up and down of her untutored voice. He thought he heard in it the strength of the soil, of history—and he wondered, suddenly, about this extra house outside of Anguillara, wondered how much it would cost to rent if he were, in the next two weeks, to become powerful himself—to come into a certain sum of money. He did not particularly want the house—though perhaps he did—but the feeling that he *could* have it, that he would soon be someone who could choose how he would live his life, filled him with a strong intoxication. He looked at the yellow wall, and then the squat, wrinkled, greasy head of the old woman. Both seemed somehow mysterious, and beautiful. He dismissed his doubts. He asked her how much it would cost to rent the house. She told him.

"Is it occupied now?" he asked.

She put on again the face that proved she bore the miseries of all the world on her poor shoulders. Occupied? Of course it wasn't occupied. Free since

the end of August. Wasn't Matteo supposed to rent it, find her a tenant to pay for her old age? And months on end the house stood empty while he dreamed over his books. He wanted her to sell the house that he couldn't even get off of his ass to rent—there is no honesty any more, no shame—and did Joe know what he had said that very morning? He was moving into Rome, he said, in one week, on his own. He didn't need her any more, her chatter or her criticisms—didn't need her money, or her house—he would be a free man soon, free to develop his soul instead of leaving it to petrify amidst the chicken shit of Anguillara . . . and she spit on the landing, showing what she thought of his ideas, his insolence.

But Joe wasn't listening any more. It was another of her typical laments—he couldn't see how Matteo, at thirty-eight, could stand to live with it. But he was thinking about the house. In his mind it sat on a bluff above the lake, with a dinghy pulled up on the sand below; a place of peace except for when he entertained, had artists over, Angelo, old friends visiting from the States. He would sit at a large antique desk, surrounded by dictionaries and thesauruses, and he would write a novel. He would

work from ten at night till four in the morning, wake up at noon, become a connoisseur of wines . . .

A wave of pain overtook him. Did he want to do this? He said goodbye to her abruptly, left her standing forlorn on the balcony, closed the door behind him. He stared at the strange, cocked Paul Revere hat that he might be wearing half a day from now.

Could he trust Angelo? Was it true that Maxwell was in Switzerland?

But Angelo had more to lose than he did. Surely he knew.

What would Maxwell do, though, if he found an impostor posing in his garden in the middle of the night?

And then, as if it had just dropped out of the blue sky and hit him with all the accumulated force of miles of gravity, Joe saw. He saw what was wrong with Angelo's plan. It was so obvious.

Why hadn't he seen it before?

He stared around the cheap apartment, at the chintzy furniture, the cold, bare floors, the pathetic, lonely pots and pans sitting forlornly on the stove: his life.

"Damn," he said to himself. He lay down on his bed, stared at the dingy ceiling, almost comatose. He vaguely felt the ceiling darken with the dark-

ness, become gray, then brown, like Angelo's old photographs . . . and this dead brown lulled him to sleep, finished, afraid. When he woke up it was black, and he was due to meet Angelo in an hour's time.

The water lapped gently on the rocks below. He sat on the wall beneath the church, shivering, staring down over the wide expanse of the lake at the gentle, volcanic hills on its far side, under the still sky. There was no noise in Anguillara. The street lamps were dim, the windows of Le Rupi closed and black.

Angelo was late.

Joe had the hat and coat in a plastic shopping bag at his feet. He had brought them, just in case. The scarred facade of the church, its relief disintegrating, grew clearer to his eyes as they got used to darkness—but also more mysterious, prophetic. The church was condemned, locked, in imminent danger of collapsing backwards into the lake. There would be a big splash, he thought, on that day. And woe to him who was fishing . . .

He heard a strange sound from below, down on the promenade, filling up the space between the rhythmic lapping of the waves. A scuffling, scuffling sound. He sat up, alert, and

peered down towards the lake. It became hard to pick out, now that he was listening for it—then impossible. Perhaps it had never been at all.

Angelo was half an hour late. Joe's ears scanned the night for the distant putter of the VW. Air-cooled engine, as Angelo always said. He thought he heard it, then he lost it in the night and doubted it had ever been. He looked back down into the lake.

"I'm here."

He started. He was right behind him, his deeply etched face looking supernatural in the vague light. He was smiling broadly. There was something manic to his face, as if he were on drugs or in a trance. Not for the first time Joe felt a tinge of fear run underneath his flesh.

"So?" Angelo looked exuberant. He wore a black jacket, leather, and his camera hung down from his neck, resting on his gut. Thin leather driving gloves were on his hands.

"You've got the clothes?" Angelo nodded at the plastic bag.

"Yes," Joe said. He felt nervous, afraid to tell him what was wrong. Maybe he should just go through with it and tell him later.

"So?" Angelo said again. His grin stretched his face unnatu-

rally. His eyes were open extra wide.

"It won't work," Joe said, breathing heavily. "There's a problem."

"What problem?" Angelo said. His face stayed the same, as if he hadn't understood the words.

"The flash."

"Right here," Angelo said, his eyes shifting briefly to the camera on his gut.

"It doesn't work," Joe said.

"It works fine," said Angelo. He flicked a button with his hand, then worked another. The flash turned the night electric blue, then died.

"I mean," Joe said, "if you had taken Maxwell, in the night, you would have had to use a flash. He won't believe the picture if he never saw a flash."

Angelo emitted a little laugh.

"Put the clothes on," he said, looking down at the bag. "You don't know anything about photography."

Joe started to shake. He felt paralyzed, tried to speak but couldn't. He did not move to put the clothes on.

Angelo relaxed and smiled.

"There are lots of films," he said calmly. "Expensive films. It's not a problem. I'll use the flash tonight—it's cheaper. Anybody knows this stuff." He

picked up the plastic bag, pulled out the hat. "Here."

Joe took the hat. He couldn't think any more. The whole enterprise seemed crazy, suddenly; Angelo did not seem sane, seemed like a dictator. He didn't know if he believed him, now, about the film. But Angelo was so big, his grin and wrinkles bursting out of his face: Joe did not really have a choice. He took the hat mechanically, placed it on his head.

"You're sure he's not here?"

"He's in Switzerland."

Angelo held the coat out. Joe put his arms in as a woman puts her arms into a coat held open by a man. He felt himself shivering but was hardly aware of it, or of anything. They were going to climb over the wall, walk through the terraced garden, shooting pictures—that was the way Maxwell had come from, Angelo said, and the more shots the better. They would go out the gate at the bottom, out onto the promenade. They would take a last shot, get into the VW, drive off. And then he would be rich. But being rich no longer meant something to him. He didn't notice when they started, couldn't have said how. Angelo must have clambered over the wall; then he was helping Joe down. His coat caught on the stones;

Angelo forced it. They stood inside the garden. Joe breathed deeply. He had crossed the line. They were in no man's land. His feet began to burn.

"Here."

It was a long, ugly, carving knife, with a dark, dirty blade. Angelo held it out in his right hand. Joe stared at it. Angelo didn't move, he only grinned, the gold in his teeth glimmering.

"What's that?" Joe whispered.

"What he killed her with," Angelo said flatly.

He suddenly went blind. Electric fire attacked his eyes, wounded them, left them seeing pink.

"Okay, let's move."

The explosions came more rapidly. Joe clutched the knife, staring at his feet, watching his shoes outlined against the flashing concrete of the stairs; he chose his steps in panic, thinking only of not falling down. He walked. There was so much light—surely Maxwell would wake up and see. But Maxwell was in Switzerland. The flash echoed against the empty window of Le Rüpi, and Joe imagined that he saw the lights come on inside, saw a hostile face stare silently behind the glass. Then everything went black except the rings of pink inside his eyes.

"Let's go, let's go." Angelo coached him down the steps. They turned, came to a landing, shot, began the next short flight. The black, jutting, irregular shapes of penetrating leaves and branches screamed with weird, insectlike patterns against the bright light of the ever-exploding flash. He heard Angelo running, passing him on the steps, crowding, shooting, running back past him, shooting from above, stepping back into the garden, fighting against the hedges, lilacs, flowerbeds, always shooting. The garden seemed to go on interminably. Jesus, Joe said to himself, stumbling. He forgot the knife, the plan, Maxwell, anything but the flash, the fumbled steps, the dark, the rushing. Jesus, this is different, he was thinking, and he felt a kind of drunken joy in an escape from being careful, right, well-planned—Jesus, this is on the edge, he said, half out loud, and he saw Angelo open up the gate, jump out onto the promenade . . . and then he had almost made it, he knew, and it was flash, flash, flash in quick succession as he felt his way out blindly toward the lake, toward the flash. Then he bumped into it.

He knew it was a body as soon as his feet tripped against it. It was a magical, instantane-

ous knowledge—the soft, cold, inert feeling, so singular, so obvious—and although he had never had any contact with dead human bodies, nor much with live ones, and although he couldn't see for the pink circles that still flashed inside his eyes, he knew just what he had run into, and his euphoria went sick. He blinked his eyes, bent down, felt the heavy load, the barely movable mass—just hard enough to still be soft—and his eyes started to see, and he stared at a pale face he must have known perfectly well, but he still did not know who it was—flaccid, an unmarked beauty: she's depressed, a lot, my wife. She dances. Sometimes gets depressed.

The words echoed in his head. Then the photographs appeared, taped onto the yellow wall, the absent dancer, nineteenth century. He heard the putt-putt starting of a car—"air-cooled," he remembered—then he was alone.

Massimo Caserna paced back and forth in front of the green chalkboard, waiting for the second journalist to come. The room was too warm—drab, windowless, with dirty yellow walls. The ten detectives sat at desks that might

have come from an ill-equipped high school. They were all too big and old for them. The detectives were swarthy, brittle, and smelled like anchovies, garlic, pungent oils—or perhaps they only looked that way. It was the weekly case review, but nobody was interested in any other case. Caserna knew it. He was almost bursting with excitement.

The journalist, a fading blonde woman from *La Repubblica*, slipped in and apologized. She pushed a button on her little tape recorder, declined a chair, and leaned against the wall. Caserna stopped pacing and sat down casually on the big metal desk before the chalkboard.

"Let me first tell you the suspect's story," he said smoothly. "And then we will . . . evaluate the case."

Some of the men took notes, others simply leaned forward on their little desks. Caserna presented the story concisely, relishing his clarity.

"Unfortunately," he said then after a pause, standing up again and pressing three fingers against the tabletop, "there are a few things wrong with it. I will try to list them for you.

"The major flaw," he said, smiling condescendingly, "is that the man supposedly called

Angelo does not seem to exist—or rather, he exists, but only in the patient's, I mean, in the suspect's brain.

"Our Lady of the Mountain is a school, and situated on the Via Cassia. It has had one biology teacher for the last twenty-five years. Her name is Angela Patterson. She is sixty-three years old. Neither she nor anyone else there has ever seen or heard of this Angelo.

"The house outside of Anguillara where Angelo had supposedly been living for four years is empty. It has been empty, according to the landlady, since early September. The tenants who rented the place up to that time have been found, and confirmed their residence.

"It is interesting, and we will come back to it, that the landlady of this house, a Signora Caselli, is also the owner of the suspect's apartment—she is, in fact, *his* landlady.

"The victim could not have been Angelo's wife, as claimed, for the very good reason that she was no one's wife: never married. Not a dancer but a prostitute, from one of the houses on Via Cavour.

"There is no Englishman named Maxwell in Le Rupi. There is no Englishman at all. Le Rupi is owned by a German banker named Schmidt, who

knows nothing of the affair and has certainly never worn a tri-cornered hat.

"The film that we received, which contains the shot you all have seen—suspect standing over victim, knife in hand—contained no further pictures of the suspect. It contained, rather, a series of landscapes, up to that single incriminating picture, and the rest of it was blank. It could not, therefore, have belonged to a man who photographed the suspect dozens of times, all the way through the gardens of Le Rupi."

Caserna paused and coughed confidently, like a lawyer who knows he has his case wrapped up. Then he went on:

"What is interesting in virtue of this evidence, which contradicts the suspect's story on almost every point, is, first, that the suspect should have dreamed it up at all; and second, that he insists on sticking with it. And I am convinced, as I think every one of you would be if you had questioned him, that he honestly believes in what he says. Each contradiction, rather than convincing him to abandon the story, leads him to append an ever more unlikely twist to it."

"For example?"

The woman's voice was sharp and cold.

"For example. Angelo becomes, after a moment's thought, no longer a biology teacher, but an impostor. He does not teach biology but for some reason claims to do so—perhaps to gain the suspect's confidence.

"For example. The landlady's son, a student named Matteo, is suddenly brought in and said to be in cahoots with Angelo. This explains the empty house. Matteo is said to have rented the house to Angelo, without telling his mother, in order to put by some cash. Angelo consequently bribes, convinces, or blackmails him into denying this. Angelo is supposed to have lived in the house since September; the landlady did not know it; Angelo moved out, leaving not a trace, a day or two ago.

"This *new* conspiracy, by the way, permits him to explain the presence of his tie clip on the victim's bra—the typical 'signature' of the psychopath. Matteo, with access to the suspect's apartment, stole it from him for Angelo once they had joined forces.

"Matteo does exist, by the way. He studies at Lettere and has just moved to Rome. He seems to be an interesting figure in the psychology of the thing, a figure marking the borderline, the blending, of the

fantasy with the reality. He had an active relationship with the suspect, which he broke off when he noticed strange behavior on his part. This would be about the time, according to the suspect, that he became a full accomplice of Angelo. The reality is there: the relationship broke off. The fantasy provides the reason.

"For example. Angelo is no longer claimed to have actually taken pictures in the garden. The suspect claims now that he only set off the flash, in order to blind him. The one picture he actually took was carefully calculated; the landscapes were taken previously, as a cover.

"I think that will suffice."

Caserna basked in the confidence he seemed to be inspiring in his men. He coughed again and then went on.

"There is a third interesting aspect, though. Not only does the suspect present an absurd story; not only does he believe in it, and twist it to fit the most damning facts; but he is absolutely rational, absolutely sane, about every other topic. As soon as he gets off Angelo and the elaborate frame-up he is supposed to have concocted, the suspect is absolutely lucid."

"And what do you make of that?"

It was the other journalist, a short, bearded, gruff-voiced

man sitting in the back of the room.

Caserna smiled.

"I am not a psychologist," he said. "Nevertheless, I have certain ideas. I don't want to insist on them—I merely lay them out before you, for what they are." He stood up and started pacing. Despite his disclaimer, it was obvious that these ideas were what most excited him.

"We have a classic case—absolutely classic—of an intricate delusional system, set in motion by a persecution complex. One could suggest—" he paused, pressing extra weight into what followed—"One could suggest a severe sexual disturbance, utterly repressed. It acts itself out but refuses to be known, even to the agent—*especially* to the agent—requiring that it be *projected* onto a fictitious persecutor, whose name, by the way—Angelo—suggests both the death in question and the overcoming of it by repression. When you die, you become an angel—no?—and thus you are not really dead. The posited connections, both between paranoia and repressed homosexuality, and between behavior, must also come into play.

"But I will not labor the point. It is in any event a very interesting case."

The policemen murmured their agreement, their appreciation.

"One practical consequence, by the way," Caserna went on, as an afterthought, "is that we can feel fairly safe in dropping the investigation of—what was the name?—the man we questioned once about the other prostitute. The one with the gold teeth. It no longer looks as if he was involved."

Caserna smiled.

"You've got that, Rafael?"

Rafael winked. He scribbled something on a notepad.

"Got it, chief."

Caserna fielded questions. Then the journalists clicked off their tape recorders, thanked him, and returned to their respective offices; and while they wrote their stories, others dreamed up meaty headlines, carefully designed to catch the public's eye through early morning smog.

The Find at Fenham Bog

by V. Pastor

St. Mary-ad-Insulam had had many vicars, but none since 1534 so close to Romanism as Reverend Atwood, whose nephew Colin referred to jokingly as "the next British pope."

Though the reverend's tendencies were more private than public, "He'll surely convert one of these days," complained his housekeeper to Colin. "That's all there'll be to it. And Fenham—I assure you of that—will not be the same without him."

Colin listened with his back to the room, looking through the window past the low stone wall where roses struggled to grow in the acidic soil. Copper-colored butterflies rested on the wall drying their wings after the rain, and the sky yawned wide among the clouds.

"Hasn't poured this way in a while, has it?" he asked to steer the conversation away from his uncle. "The bogs must be badly soaked."

The silence caused him to look back. Mrs. Potter had left the picture-crowded small studio, and Reverend Atwood was just coming in. He was a florid elder whose sermons during the war, some fifteen years past, had rallied and moved to tears the sparse population of St. Mary's and Fenham.

"There's been a bogslide up Cooke's way," he volunteered. "Ruined half of the vegetable crop along the south side of his land. I know you planned to visit today," he added with a kind light in his eye, "but you'll find him cursing a great deal."

The bogs, usually carpeted with pale tufts of grass, showed this morning wide pools and treacherous beds of soft mud. Higher than the pools stood silt islands such as that which gave name to St. Mary's, cultivated from time immemorial in small squarish lots.

Edmund Cooke had actually finished cursing by the time Atwood reached his cottage at the end of the road where smooth-limbed alders stretched out their bright green leaves. Cooke stood in heavy rubber boots by his doorstep, hands on his hips, surveying the



THE CONSTABLE LIFTED A ROSY-CHEEKED FACE FROM IT TO COLIN ATWOOD. "NOW THEN, SIR, HERE YOU ARE; WILL YOU TAKE A LOOK AT THIS?"

disaster of felled stems in his flowerbeds. He would not acknowledge Atwood's expressions of concern until, "You call this a slide?" he gruffly took up. "Now, the County Kilmore slide forty-five years ago, that was worthy of the name."

With Widow Cary, Dr. and Mrs. Perkins, and a handful of others, Edmund Cooke lived at the edge of the bog, where alder trees and cotton grass luxuriated at this time of year. Small though the neighborhood was, the war had touched it in various ways. The Perkinses had had a son blinded in Burma, Mrs. Cary had been widowed by it, and Edmund Cooke's wife had run off with a sergeant of the Guard, leaving two young daughters behind. One of the many children evacuated from London during the Blitz, Colin had been their playmate fifteen years back, and Millie Cooke had been his sweetheart even then.

"Well, I expect that's all the sugar beet I'm bound to get this year." Cooke sternly looked away from the sight of his half-ruined field. "Spot of tea, Colin?"

Colin had good reason to accept. As always, there was an orderly air in the cottage; he had the impression of a near-womanish ability in the way Cooke kept things neat and in place. Colin accepted the offer of tea in order to have a chance to talk to him. Millie said it would not be difficult if he but gave himself time.

"So, how bad is it the Perkinses' way?" Cooke was asking.

"Fairly bad. It slid right across to the Old Cut." The Old Cut had been dug by fenmen one hundred years earlier, some of them Irish immigrants who used their long-handled marking irons to cut the peat and wooden slanes to slice it into turfs.

"That's not all." Colin sipped the warm drink. "They found a poor chap in the peat."

Cooke made a face. "A dead man!"

"Quite dead."

Small sunlight reflections from the window played on the delicate Derby china set against the dark wood of the sideboard. Colin put his cup down, and Cooke stared at him over the steamy rim of his own. "The bog does that now and then. Fenmen have been getting drunk and falling into it since fenmen cut peat."

Colin wondered if it was the right time about Millie and himself. "I expect so," he answered. "The constable's been called in. All of Fenham and St. Mary's turned out, of course, but now the bog's off limits. I think I'll be allowed on because of my job."

Cooke studiously buttered his toast. "Still taking photographs for the big daily?"

"Yes. There seems to be no great call for college teachers yet, Mr. Cooke, but the newspaper pays well."

The body had been exposed when an overly wet section of the newer peat had collapsed, confusing the deep layers of bricklike substance with the fresh, darker mulch, almost liquid in texture and still rich in decaying vegetable matter. The constable lifted a rosy-cheeked face from it to Colin Atwood. "Now then, sir, here you are; will you take a look at this?"

Colin stepped into the yielding, water-oozing soil, wherefrom a distinctive bitter odor rose to his nostrils. Two other policemen worked gently with spades around a brownish, nearly shiny shape, something like a tanned leather balloon that has deflated. One hand stuck out slightly from the mass, fingers curled inwards towards the palm, nails closely cropped.

Atwood took a picture of it.

"Looks like the chap got his head bashed," the constable went on. "The right side of the skull's caved in."

Atwood continued to photograph while the men freed the shape from the matrix in which it had been enclosed. Flat on its stomach, the thing seemed to end at the waist, where decay had been so complete as to obliterate the hips. It took the men some careful shoveling to reveal what remained of the legs from the knees down.

"Any idea who it could be?"

The constable wiped some sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, heedful not to soil himself with the greasy dirt.

"Well, we have little to come and go on. A bloke from Wales who sold tinware was lost some twenty years past. Ten or eleven years before that, your uncle will remember, the sexton of St. Mary's took a shortcut through the bogs in the spring and never came out. Why, this could even be the German flyer I saw bail out in 1942—"

The weather threatened again, with large deep-hulled clouds floating overhead, dazzling white of contour but gray and full at the centers. The constable was in a hurry to haul the body in, so a hand barrow was fetched. Atwood impulsively removed his coat and laid it on the ladderlike device.

"Are you sure you want your coat made unusable, sir?" one of the policemen objected.

"Yes, yes. Let it be."

With great attention, removing the whole layer of peat packed under the body, the torso was extracted and laid on the barrow. As a grim chocolate mass it was transported into the police car. Atwood leaned over to see how much of the legs could be safely lifted. With a stick, lightly, he freed the ankles and flattened feet from the peat. The constable looked over his shoulder.

"Boots or shoes or anything?"

"No." Atwood glanced back. "But there are stones close to the feet."

Reverend Atwood waited until Mrs. Potter left the room before resuming the conversation.

"Old Thomas left at seven in the evening, although the then rector, Dr. Hill, warned him not to go out in the dark after the rains. But Tom 'had fought 'arf a century for 'Er Majesty Queen Victoria,' as he said, and would not be afraid of a 'bit o' wet soil.' All that was found of him was his cap, and the Lord knows how it flew off when he stepped into the bog. A man of seventy—would it not be some compensation if his body were found so close to St. Thomas' Day?"

"They will run tests at Queen's Hospital," Colin felt he should say. "They'll be able to tell how old a man, I'd imagine."

"Tom had a lame hip from his India service."

"Won't help, Uncle, the sides are gone."

Atwood was greatly tempted to say how the constable had reacted to his mention of stones near the corpse's feet. Without words, but with renewed earnestness, he had bid his men look for a piece of cord or string or leather thong, though none was found.

"Seems the chap's been weighted down." He had spoken up at last. "Better take another photo of the stones."

But it was not the time to tell. Atwood waited until his uncle readied for his morning constitutional. Handing him his umbrella, "No reason for the sexton to do away with himself, was there?" he casually asked.

"Tom?" The vicar seemed surprised at the question. "He had arthritis and was in much pain, God keep him. Still I doubt he'd have gone to such extremes." He stepped out of the house, and in the sunlight his white hair formed a kindly halo around his head. "And what is your errand today, Colin?"

"I asked the police to let me continue with the photographs. They'll call me to the hospital when they begin the medical exami-

nation. But first," he admitted shyly, "I'm due back to Mr. Cooke's."

Mrs. Perkins stopped him on the way to Cooke's house and asked him to come in. She was curious, naturally, and knowing the gossip of a small town simplified Colin's decision to keep mum.

"Of course, there was the peddler from Wales." She sucked her cheeks in. "A Catholic, I think, and he loved the bottle."

"A poor fellow, really," the tame Mr. Perkins interjected. "He disappeared maybe a month before you children came to Fenham. No one missed him except his dog that sat yelping at the edge of the great bog. Would snap at anyone who'd try to draw near, and the police finally had to shoot him."

Mrs. Perkins would not be outdone in passing out information. "He stole, too—the man, not the dog. One of my silver porringers was turned out lacking the day after he went. Did you hear if silver porringers were found near the body?"

"Not that I know of."

"Well, it may not be Christian to say, but thieves ought to be drowned in bogs."

Atwood gave her an amused look. "Like the old Britons did two thousand years ago?"

"Well. Thievery is thievery. Your uncle will agree with that."

The bog appeared less treacherous now that the weather had become drier. The pools of shallow water had begun shrinking, and only here and there the darting of water insects on their surface could be seen, as a wink in the liquid.

Sulphurs and coppers flew in the alders when Atwood picked up his pace after leaving the fern rich edge of the wetland by the Perkins house. Cooke was in the garden, raising flowers in bunches and tying them to hold up their rain-logged heads. He didn't hear Atwood come, and, "You startled me," said then.

Atwood was glad of the chance to reminisce. "Millie used to do that with me when we were children."

Making leverage against the fence, Cooke rose to his feet with a grin. "You and Millie were close enough, those months. I thought for certain something would come of it one day."

Atwood made a compunct face, because the true reason for his visit to Fenham had been exposed and was immediately impossible to hide. "Something might," he self-consciously spoke.

"Well, well, well, and what would that be?" Cooke widened his grin. "Something we ought to talk about, maybe?"

"We found out two months ago that we work in the same building." Atwood wondered why he was justifying himself. "And as you say, we were ever so close as children—I must have cared for Millie since I was ten."

Cooke let him in. "Hopefully she's grown less fantastic than she was as a child. She could tell tales then." His face lost its smile for a moment. "But then I did the best I could bringing up both of them on my own."

On the examination table the brownish torso had been laid out belly up. Atwood was given surgical smock and gloves, and for a few moments all that followed was the click of his camera and the brief greenish flash of it. The approximate height of the body was calculated by the length of the extant leg bones. What remained of the distorted and flattened face only very vaguely hinted at what the live person had looked like. Wisps of reddish hair stayed in patches on the skull.

Atwood did not remove his fascinated eyes from the body. He followed minutely the cutting and resecting and clamping that exposed the ribcage in the search for inner organs.

"The legs we've looked at already." The surgeon's voice came muffled from under his mask as he took out small pieces of leathery stuff that might have been lung tissue. "There are marks around the ankles. The victim was done in, undoubtedly."

Here and there from the surface of the body, only apparently at random, the gloved fingers picked up nearly invisible scraps—insect casings, it seemed, bits of charred wood or cloth.

"It will cause a stir in Fenham," the surgeon continued. "Nothing much happens in those parts, does it?"

Atwood felt moved and very unwilling to speak, and small indeed before the secrets that Nature decides to let out as she pleases.

He said nothing to his uncle that afternoon, and Reverend Atwood knew him too well to insist. A visit by the Perkinses was dexterously avoided by getting out through the back door, but Widow Cary stood there, and Colin must at her slow pace walk the mile or so that separated him from her house on the way to Cooke's.

"I hear there's something romantic in the air," the old woman regaled him when he left her at her doorstep. "I don't doubt you might be quite pleased with an answer today."

Cooke lit himself a pipe after inviting him to sit down. Ceremonious asking for a daughter's hand was outdated, but both men fol-

lowed the unspoken rules all the same. The conversation would slide to Millie gradually, Atwood knew, and was relieved that it began somewhere else.

"So, how's your dead chap?" Cooke puffed some smoke out of his mouth. "Been photographing him, have you?"

"I have. The age was established at thirty-five or so."

Cooke paused. "That leaves out old Tom and the peddler, eh?"

Atwood nodded. Briefly, because he was anxious about his personal errand, he told Cooke what he had kept from his uncle and the others, about the reddish hair and the marks around the body's ankles.

Cooke listened with the astonished attention he had expected from all villagers. "Do you intend to tell me a German pilot was willfully drowned in the bog fifteen years ago?"

"Not hardly: the sex was wrongly identified, you see. And the skull being broken—"

Cooke put away his pipe. He said, somewhat hollow-voiced, "A clear case of murder, then."

"Yes. There will be plenty to probe yet." Atwood fidgeted, wishing Cooke would get to the point of telling him yes or no about Millie. The body in the bog had very little relevance for him now.

Cooke took up his pipe and stuck it in his mouth.

"They were trying to figure out—" Awkwardly, Atwood continued to fill the silence until Cooke took him out of suspense with an unexpected, very wide grin. The grin went from one ear to the other like a cut across his face, but his voice was friendly and a relief to Atwood.

"Come now, Colin Atwood! I always knew you to be clever; you should have not held back this long," Cooke scolded. "What kept you until now?"

Atwood thought the statement superfluous. "I do love Millie," he said, unsure of the reason why Cooke laughed at the words.

"You're two of a kind, you and Millie." He stared at him as if the decision were even now being made in his head. "You can have her, and she can have you."

It was well after dinner that the telephone rang at the rectory of St. Mary-ad-Insulam. Mrs. Potter picked up the receiver. "Reverend," she said, looking up from it, "the police wish to speak with you."

Reverend Atwood had been winning at checkers, something that seldom happened, and at first he didn't seem inclined to leave the board, though his nephew had visibly stopped considering his next move after the call.

"Yes, yes, hallo?" For a good minute the priest listened, his saintly head stuck on his collar like a fuzzy cork on a black bottle. "Extraordinary," was all that came out of him at the end of sixty seconds. In a man not inclined towards hyperbole, this was as unusual as winning at checkers.

"More news about the body?" Atwood urged.

Reverend Atwood detached the receiver from his ear as though he had become glued to it. Stiff-backed, stiff-voiced, "The constable wants to speak to you, Colin," he said, and, "Most extraordinary," repeated to himself as he went not back to his chair but to the sherry cabinet.

The constable's voice came pasty over the wire. "Mr. Atwood, sir—looks like a bit of a pickle here, I was telling your reverend uncle. I wonder whether you'd be willing to motor down to the station."

Colin Atwood glanced at his wristwatch. "At this hour?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. You see, we've got your neighbor Mr. Cooke here—confessed to bashing his wife's head in 1942, and sinking her in the bog. Says he knew we were bound to find out and he might as well spare us some time. Says there never was a sergeant of the Guard. Would you be so good as to come down and speak to him, owing that you're nearly in the family?"

Atwood made no immediate effort to reply. The tales Millie had told him as a child came back, of her finding her mother's left shoe at the bogside months after she was gone, and the other before the cotton grass bloomed. Millie who told stories about hearing unusually heavy footsteps in the hall on the night her mother had disappeared. He felt a pang like a blow in the chest and—immediately—a need to speak up as he recovered from it.

"Constable," he exclaimed, eyes on his mystified uncle and wildly wondering Mrs. Potter, "we had an expert at the hospital today: the body belongs to a much older dead."

"Well, Mr. Cooke says he knew it was his wife by the weights and bashed head, but the red hair is what did him in—took us into the cellar to show us what he used, too, a hearthstone with blood still on it."

Atwood kept his lips very tight before speaking. "I will be coming over presently." He lowered the receiver. To his uncle, who obviously had been told and now mulled the question in his mind with a sad and grave face, "The acidic environment of the bog changes the chemical structure of the hair," he voiced slowly. "It makes any color turn reddish in time. And the head—the head was not bashed in at all. It simply caved in under the weight of the peat these two thousand years. My God, the body is some poor Romano-British woman sacrificed in a springtime ritual. What in our conversation made Mr. Cooke even think I suspected him?"

Reverend Atwood sat back down at the table, eyes fixed on the board where checkers waited. "'For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me.' How well Paul knew, who had himself shed blood." He made a vague gesture towards the telephone. "You had better ring up Millie in London before you go, Colin."

It was raining when Colin Atwood left St. Mary-ad-Insulam for the police station. Through the open window—because it was sultry ahead of the season—a gentle water spray came into the car. The deep, sour odor of the bog beds floated from the dark beyond Fenham, where no lights were on, as if the sparse houses had been already absorbed by the thick ooze year after year rising around them like a ring of unreliable silence.

UNSOLVED

by
Stew Thornley

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the July issue.

The following account contains the titles of all fifty-three of Alfred Hitchcock's movies. That's right—fifty-three. How many can you find?

OUR TOWN

Dorothy's vertigo, and her fear of the mountain eagle, make it difficult for her to climb the thirty-nine steps to inspect the sabotage. Instead, she pulls on the rope hanging from the top of the bell tower. The ring of the bell startles the saboteur, who jumps out the rear window into the pleasure garden and runs north by northwest toward a nearby farm. From a distance he looks so young and innocent that the farmer's wife, a woman of easy virtue, thinks he is the lodger who is to room with them. When she dashes out to greet him, though, she becomes alarmed at his unkempt appearance and fears he is a thief out to steal her topaz, which she keeps in the paradine case. She knows that to catch a thief she will have to set a trap, so she calls her cousin and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, who live down the road from the Gale place, to ask for their help. This is to be a family plot.

But alas, the mysterious stranger passes by. In a frenzy, he barrels through the birds outside the Jamaica Inn, nearly falling over Juno and the paycock, scampers downhill toward the valley, and hops the Number 17 bus for the depot, where he is to meet the Manxman. With so many strangers on a train, he thinks he can blend in as he searches for the foreign correspondent to receive further instructions. He picks the wrong man, however, and a secret agent emerges from behind a torn curtain to arrest him on suspicion of blackmail.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, the farmer's niece Marnie sits in her dressing room, contemplating her problem. I confess I know little about the skin game, her daytime occupation, but the

trouble with Harry, her sting partner, is the risks he takes—beyond a shadow of a doubt, notorious for destroying the confidence of a young actress already overcome with stage fright. She tries to calm herself with a bottle of champagne, but gets so tanked she is unable to stand up; as a result, her understudy Rebecca performs the scene containing the waltzes from Vienna.

Outside the theater, Dorothy and Toto gaze upward, spellbound by the constellations. As she sits under Capricorn, Dorothy realizes she is late for dinner and that Auntie Em will be furious if she doesn't call. But a rich and strange crazed killer is lurking behind the phone booth when she begins to dial Em. For murder to be effective, no evidence should be left behind. So, after committing his evil deed, the killer steals a lifeboat and rows to the middle of the bay, where he throws Dorothy's body overboard. As the lady vanishes beneath the water, he remembers he has left the dead dog back on shore. Toto's carcass is enough to have him arrested and tried for murder.

He isn't convicted, though, because his attorney, once called by the prosecution the man who knew too much about insanity defenses, gets him off on the grounds that he is a psycho.

Danger, Inc.

by D. H. Reddall

Physical ailments have a way of bringing the body into focus, of making us aware of the springs and levers that animate the flesh.

I'd fallen incorrectly in the dojo and was still being brought up short now and then by a ragged pain across my lower back. Lying flat on the floor helped, but then some hammer-handed accordion player began violating "Lady of Spain" in the music store below my office. That got me on my feet. It was lunchtime anyway.

Floyd Cusick owns the Rudder and does most of the cooking. He slapped something down in front of me that he claimed was chow mein and slid the paper over to me before ducking into his kitchen.

The chow mein looked like something a dog left on a shag rug. The newspaper quoted some pedagogical pinhead who referred to his school hallways as "behavior transition corridors" and to making friends as "improving the interface." The guy next to me made strange grunting noises while he ate. And my back was starting to

feel like George Foreman's punching bag. I had lime pie and coffee and got out of there.

There was a call on my answering machine: a voice from the past.

"Stub, this is Johnny Lyle. I need to talk to you. Tonight at ten. Pilgrim Mall, behind Sears. I'll find you."

That was all. It was enough. I hadn't seen Johnny in a few years, but that didn't matter. He hadn't given me much advance notice, and that didn't matter either.

I was still hungry and wanted something that didn't smell and taste like a motor-man's glove. So I drove over to Sam Diego's for a salad, a plate of quesadillas, and a Dos Equis. While I ate, I thought about Johnny Lyle.

We'd been in Vietnam together, and we'd pulled each other through some pretty bad times. Johnny was a decent man, quiet, a bit of a loner. Like a lot of us, he'd gone to Vietnam an idealist and come home something rather different.

I maintain an uneasy truce with my memories of the war. I have no desire to delve too often or too deeply into them. Seeing Johnny could disturb that truce. On the other hand, I was pretty certain from the voice on the machine that he was in trouble. That meant, like it or not, I was involved.

The mall was a logical place to meet: lots of cars, lots of people coming and going. It would be easy to blend in. Just a couple of guys waiting for their wives.

While I waited, I surveyed the various stores—gourmet candy, expensive denim pants, toys, expensive denim jackets, audio equipment, expensive footwear to go with all the denim—and realized that there wasn't one thing in the whole bustling complex that any of us really needs. Judging from the number of shopping bags I saw, however, my opinion was not widely shared.

By ten thirty I was getting uneasy. At eleven the mall closed, and I drove home. I imagined several scenarios that could have caused Johnny to miss the rendezvous. I didn't believe any of them.

It was on the news the next morning: "Decorated Vietnam veteran John Lyle was found murdered early

this morning in a North Street parking lot—"

By the time I got to North Street there wasn't much to see, just the yellow police ribbons, a couple of uniforms, a few ghouls. I walked up to the ribbon and saw the chalk outline that represented my friend's last moments on this plane.

I didn't see Eddie Olivera until he appeared next to me and put a large square hand on my shoulder. It was a light touch for a cop.

"You and Johnny were in the same outfit."

"Yeah. 101st Airborne, Airmobile. We were in Phu Bai together." Olivera was a vet. I knew he'd been in Dak To in '67. The names of these places are sufficient. Nothing more needs to be said.

"What have you got?" I asked.

Olivera chewed on the plastic tip of his thin cigar and watched a tow truck take away a nice new Miata.

"Massive trauma to the head. Probably a length of pipe. Haven't found it." He chewed some more. "Wallet on the ground, no money. Pockets empty, watch missing." I raised my eyebrows. "Suntan," he added.

"No witnesses. Time of death estimated to be between twelve

and two." He examined the cigar minutely. "You see Johnny lately?"

"No, I haven't seen him in four, five years. There's more, isn't there?"

Olivera sighed heavily.

"Traces of white powder in the jacket pockets. It's being analyzed."

We paused while a plane made a low approach to the airport nearby. For a minute I was back in-country, smelling the jungle, scared, kissing the earth, trying to burrow into it while the countryside was consumed by fire and concussion and madness. Some soldiers dealt with the madness by taking drugs.

"So you figure Johnny's been dealing, got involved in a transaction that went sour, and got whacked."

"Something like that. All we know so far is what I've told you. That and the fact that he quit his job a couple of months ago. It could add up."

"It could," I said, "except for two things. One, Johnny had no use for drugs. He could never understand why anyone would touch them. I can't believe he'd be peddling."

Olivera shrugged. "You said it's been five years. People can change. What's number two?"

"One junkie with nothing better than a piece of pipe

wouldn't even have been a warmup for Johnny. Two or three, he might have broken a sweat."

Olivera eyed me carefully. "I'll keep that in mind. And, Charles, we'll get the bastard."

Hundreds of thousands of Vietnam vets suffer to some degree from post-traumatic stress disorder. Some reside in prison. About a hundred thousand reside nowhere and are counted among the homeless. One of them is Tom Fetter.

I found Tom sitting on a bench near the foot of Main Street, smoking a cigarette and soaking up the afternoon sun. His beard was neatly trimmed and his clothes were clean, but he looked thin and a little worn.

"How's it go, Tom?" He squinted up at me.

"Stub. 'Sapnin'?"

I sat down and admired the clean white lines of the Federated Church across the street. A few sparrows juked around on the lawn. An enormous man approached the Elite Diner two doors down. The window of the diner bore a sign: "All you can eat: \$5." The fat man's face bore a look of grim determination.

"How was the winter?"

"Cold."

Well, of course it was. How the hell did I think his winter had been.

"You heard about Johnny Lyle?"

"I heard. It's a damn shame." He finished the last half inch of his smoke and deftly flipped it into the gutter.

"You heard anything might help me?"

"Not really. Kind of lost touch with Johnny. He kept a low profile anyway, you know. Didn't have many friends." He got up and stretched. "There is a guy." He hoisted his duffel onto his shoulder. "Barry Eng. He's a vet. He's also part owner of the Cameo Club. Word is he and Johnny were tight lately. Maybe he can tell you something." He started up the street, then stopped.

"Stub, you want to move easy around Eng. He's got a hair trigger. If he decides he doesn't like you, he won't bother half-stepping."

I watched Tom make his way up Main Street, striding purposefully like a man who has someplace to go.

The Cameo Club was located on the strip between a pizza joint and an army surplus store. It exhibited all the ambience of a bus terminal.

By nine o'clock the lot was filled with motorcycles, pickup

trucks, and Camaros mottled with red primer. My well-worn Toyota fit right in.

The bartender was sail-eared and looked as if someone had slammed a car door on his face a few times. It seemed unlikely that anyone would mention that to him, though. He also had stretch marks on his biceps and no discernible neck. I got a beer and sat down at a table that was probably bigger than a dinner plate.

There didn't appear to be anyone in the place over twenty-five except for me and Quasimodo behind the bar. Guys checked out the girls, the girls noticed or else pretended not to. Two rawboned bikers slammed balls around the pool table. A big screen showed skiers in slow motion performing flips and twists amid explosions of snow.

A waitress appeared: long legs, blonde hair, black T-shirt with large white letters. The letters said: "Contents Under Pressure," the message distorted by heroic breasts.

"'Nother beer?" she asked. I shook my head.

"Where can I find Barry Eng?" She frowned.

"Wait."

A minute later she was huddled with the bartender. He glared at me and came out from behind the bar. People moved

out of his way without having to be told. He came up and stood across the table from me.

"Who're you?"

"I'd like to have a word with Barry Eng."

A grimace crossed his battered face. It was, I realized, a smile. "Got an appointment?"

"Nope."

"Then you can't see him."

"How do you know? You haven't asked him yet."

The smile disappeared. He jerked a banana-sized thumb toward the door.

"Take a hike, stupid."

"I'd say you're shy a few manners," I said, getting up. "You're also proof that there are more horses' asses than there are horses."

He blinked in disbelief. Then he swiped the table out of the way as if it were made of Styrofoam and lunged at me, face swollen with rage. He threw a straight right at my head on the way in.

I stepped back at a forty-five degree angle and drove a side kick into his midsection. It's a punishing blow, and it sent him back with explosive force against the bar, sending people and glassware flying. I moved in as he rebounded from the bar and hit him twice in the face. He crashed back against the polished mahogany again and folded up on the floor, blood

running from his nose and mouth. His lips were torn where teeth had gone through them, and one eye was already swelling shut.

I retreated a step, still in a side stance, and automatically scanned the room. Quasimodo moaned, twitched one leg, moaned again. Glass crunched as some of the patrons approached to get a better look.

The waitress appeared from a room in the back, followed by a man about my age wearing a blue sweatsuit. He walked over and surveyed the wreckage on the floor. For a second I saw something like amusement in his eyes. Then he motioned to a couple of steroid cases wearing Cameo Club T-shirts who proceeded to drag the bartender away. Sweatsuit waved me toward the back.

I followed him into a small office. He perched on a corner of the desk, scanning me with flat black eyes.

"Nobody's ever put Mickey to sleep before."

"He made a mistake," I said.

"Yeah?"

"He lost his temper."

"He was doing his job."

"What if I'd been a liquor salesman?"

"You aren't."

"Is it always this difficult to see you?"

"Why don't you tell me who you are and what you want, okay?"

"My name is Stubblefield. Johnny Lyle was a friend of mine."

"Uh-huh."

"That's it? 'Uh-huh'?"

"Listen up, buddy. Lyle was a jerk, a loser. He couldn't hold a job, he had no discipline, he let his friends down, the few he had."

"I heard you were his friend."

Eng sat down at the desk and lit a cigarette.

"He came to me after he quit his last job, looking for work. What the hell, he was a vet, seemed like a nice guy. I had a full staff at the time, but I gave him work. I let him clean up, put away stock, do some maintenance, whatever."

"Then a few days ago he comes to work lit up, stoned. I don't let junkies work for me. I don't like junkies. I don't like the kind of people they attract. So I gave him his walking papers, told him if I saw him around the club again I'd put Mickey to work."

"Mickey wouldn't have been up to the task."

"No?"

"No. And Johnny wasn't a junkie when I knew him."

"Well, he was when I knew him. And I figure he screwed up again. Maybe he burned some-

body. Maybe he didn't pay his bills. Who knows? Now, I've got things to do, like find someone to come in to work since you've kicked the crap out of my bartender."

I left the club and drove home, where I opened a beer and tried to imagine Johnny Lyle a junkie. I couldn't.

I still couldn't the next day, so I drove over to the sporting goods store where Johnny had last worked before the Cameo Club. Tony Baranello showed me into his office.

"I always liked Johnny. He was with me about a year. Can't understand why he left. Didn't even give notice or nothin'. Just calls up one morning and says he's through. Sort of got my gander up a little, you want to know the truth. Ya see, I look at a job as being like a two-way sword. One hand greasin' the other, you know? I done good by Johnny. He shouldn'ta left me in the lurch like that." Baranello swiped a pile of invoices to one side and folded his arms on the desk.

"I mean, I don't expect a guy to be internally grateful or nothin' like that, but a year—I expected a little consideration."

"Did you notice any changes in Johnny's behavior toward the end?"

"Like what?"

"Did he appear tired on the job? Let his personal appearance deteriorate? Come in late, leave early?"

"No, no, and no."

"Did you see any indications that Johnny might have had a problem with alcohol or drugs?"

"Uh-uh. Absolutely not. He was a good employee. Oh, sometimes it seemed like he was goin' through the notions, you know. A little bored maybe, especially late winter—we're a little slow then. But hey, I don't want to be casting any dispersions here. Johnny was okay, you know what I mean?"

"Yes, sir," I said, getting up to leave. "And thank you, Mr. Baranello. You've made yourself redundantly clear."

I put Johnny out of my mind over the weekend while I tried to get photographic evidence of fraud in a workman's compensation case. The guy was sharp, though: he never went out without his brace, and I didn't see him lift anything heavier than his mail. By Sunday evening I was bored silly, and all the sitting in the car had made my back sore again.

Maybe I should get into some other line of work. Something steady and respectable where I don't have to step off the gutter

and down into the sewer in order to make a buck.

Sure. And maybe I should try to push a rope, too.

In the next few days I found that Tom Fetter was right: Johnny didn't seem to have had many friends.

I started frequenting places where vets tend to congregate, and asking questions. I got blank looks and shrugs until one afternoon a pool player at the VFW said that he'd seen Johnny a few times at Spike's, a bar out on the strip in West Yarmouth. He suggested that I look up a guy known as Barbecue Bob.

Barbecue Bob had been a pilot in the war. He was a slight, brooding man with thinning blond hair and a serious commitment to drunkenness. I was certain I didn't want to know how he got his nickname.

When I asked about Johnny, his eyes glazed over. When I mentioned Barry Eng, he got up and walked to the far end of the bar. I followed him, footsore and impatient.

"I don't know those guys. Ask somebody else, why don't you?"

I put my hand on his shoulder where it joined his neck, and then I squeezed. He winced and tried to pull away. I squeezed harder. The bar-

tender started to drift down our way.

"Look, Bob, there's no need for this to get ugly. Now, Johnny was a friend of mine. I need to know anything you can tell me about him."

Bob jerked away from my grip and took a quick look around the bar, blinking rapidly.

"Man, you don't know what you're dealing with. Butt out while you're still standing." With that he pushed by me and hurried out the door.

He was gone by the time I reached the street, but he'd given me an idea. I bought a paper and checked out AA meetings. There were two listed for that night.

Neither one panned out. I was leaving the second one when Eddie Olivera climbed out of an unmarked car and waved me over.

"What's up, lieutenant?"

"Get in," he growled.

He handed me a cardboard cup of battery acid labeled "coffee."

"Since when you had a drinking problem, Charles?"

"Since the first time I tried your brand of coffee," I said. Olivera took a slug from his cup and grimaced.

"You've been asking a lot of questions lately, about Johnny." I didn't say anything.

"Look, you and Johnny were buddies, you went through the grinder together in Nam. I understand that. But you want to back off here a little?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm asking you to, that's why."

"Eddie, I've spent the better part of the week asking around. All I get is, 'Huh? Johnny who?' When I finally find a guy who might have some word, he treats me like something he got on his shoe. Suppose you tell me what's going on."

Olivera took another sip, mumbled something rude, poured the rest of his coffee out the window.

"This is bigger than just Johnny. That's all I can tell you, except that you could get hurt. Now, that won't cause me to lose any sleep. But you're also making waves, and you could foul up months of hard work. That *does* cause me to lose sleep. So lay off."

"Gee, Eddie. Last week one junkie whacked another with a pipe is all. No big deal. A few days later it's bigtime. Now I wonder why?"

"I've cut you a lot of slack in the past, God knows why. This time I'm asking—no, I'm telling you: go home, go fishing, go to Cancún. But cease and desist on John Lyle. We'll get the

slime that killed him. Now I've already said too much."

I got out of the car. Olivera peeled away from the curb, leaving me with a cup of lousy coffee and a lot of unanswered questions.

Hope springs eternal. I stopped for lunch at The Rudder the next day. Beyond all expectations, the chicken actually tasted like chicken and the tomatoes in my salad didn't have the consistency of Spaldeens.

Conversations overheard while eating:

"Couldn't see much of the game: they stuck me so far up in the bleachers I got a nose-bleed."

"What kind of gun? One that stops them when they come through the door."

"If they only pay half a cent a word, you ought to write a story about a stutterer."

"Overweight? Hell, if they rendered that sucker down, the city would go back to oil lamps."

"When's the best time to plant a dogwood tree?"

"About twenty years ago."

I tried three more places that afternoon, all with negative results. That night I attended another AA meeting, came up

empty, and was heading for my car when I noticed her.

She was leaning up against a gray Chevy with her hands in plain view on the fender. I checked the street, saw nothing obvious. I had to pass by her to get to my car. When I did, she spoke up.

"Mr. Stubblefield?"

Nobody in her car. Nobody that I could see in any of the cars nearby. Doorways empty. Roofs clear.

"That's right."

"We need to talk."

"What about?"

"John Lyle."

"Who are you?"

"Agent Tracy, Treasury Department. No cracks about the name, please."

"Let's see some identification."

She carefully produced a badge and a photo I.D. card.

"Okay," I said, "what's the beef?"

"Let's talk in the car." We got in, she started the car, and we began driving slowly around the block.

"Olivera tells us that you are a very stubborn individual." She wasn't being hard about it, more amused than anything. "Sometimes the local law are bozos. Olivera is not a bozo. Neither is the chief. They thought I should explain the situation to you."

"I'm listening."

"You've inserted yourself into a longstanding investigation. Without going into details, I'll tell you that it involves, among others, the FBI, the DEA, the state police, and the D.A.'s office in Barnstable, Dukes, and Bristol counties."

"And Treasury." She nodded.

"You're being given this information because we want to impress upon you the gravity of the situation. You could disrupt this investigation, and if you do, I can guarantee that we will hang you out to dry. If you're still alive." She finished circling the block and pulled up behind my car.

"Rest assured that every effort will be made to apprehend the person who killed Lyle."

I opened my door.

"Leave it alone," she said. "Lyle's dead. The war is over."

I got out and leaned back on the car.

"No," I said. "The war's never over."

Friday afternoon brought with it a visitor: Barry Eng. He sauntered in, leaving the door open, and sat down across from me.

"I got some word for you. About Lyle."

He looked around the office. Then he got out a cigarette and

proceeded to fire it up. I got tired of waiting.

"Were you thinking of sharing the information?"

Eng smiled, but his eyes were as empty as last year's nests. He nodded at my swollen knuckles.

"Mickey's got a hard head." He took a long drag and let smoke dribble out his nostrils. "Next time he sees you, he's going to hurt you, bigtime."

"Sure he is," I said. "Just like last time." We both smiled. None of it meant anything. It was just mileage until Eng got around to the point.

"I been checking up on you, Stubblefield. Homeboy, football star in high school, got a college degree, army, Nam, black belt in Kempo along the way. Been a peeper for six, seven years, drive a garbage scow for a car, work out of this roachtrap, live alone." He shook his head. "Very impressive. A real class act."

"Right," I said. "Maybe I'll move up one of these days, buy into a third-rate greaser bar out on the strip. Then I can get to watch the motorheads smack each other with cue sticks every night and gain some valuable insight into life from musclebound morons like Mickey."

Eng's face darkened.

"I don't think we're going to get along."

"I don't think I give a damn," I said. "You've got something to tell me, tell me. Then get the hell out of here."

Eng laughed. "Now who's lost his temper?" He ground the smoke out on my desk and stood up.

He was very fast. First there was no gun, then there was.

"Now, you want to be careful here," he said. His eyes were glistening. "I haven't had to smoke anybody in a while. But I will if you don't follow these simple instructions: walk ahead of me, get in the front seat of the black Bimmer in front of your office. Keep your hands where I can see them. Keep your goddamned mouth shut."

Mickey drove. Eng sat in back with the gun. I kept my mouth shut.

A man named Roger Stark was talking.

"I've divided the human race into two groups. There's nothing unusual about that, of course. Most people do: capitalists and communists, powerboaters and sailors, winners and losers."

We were sitting in the living room of Stark's house near Tom's Hill in Truro. Eng sat on the windowsill, still holding the automatic. Stark rocked

back in his chair and appraised me with cold blue eyes.

"In my scheme of things, Group One is composed of sober folk who grow dahlias or collect stamps and take whatever crap their wives or their bosses hand out. Once in a while they bet twenty bucks at the track or push the Buick up to eighty and think they're living dangerously. This group includes most people, and basically they're milksops."

"And Group Two?"

"Ah. Group Two." He rocked down and poured two glasses of brandy, shoving one across the desk to me. We were just a couple of guys having an affable conversation over drinks. I hadn't been so indelicate yet as to mention anything about guns or kidnapping.

"Group Two is infinitely smaller and much more interesting from a psychological perspective. The members of Group Two are driven by rather more complex motives."

"Such as?"

"Such as the need for danger."

"What, like skydiving?"

Stark shook his head.

"Skydiving, despite a slight element of risk, is a wimp sport. Now you take that skydiver and have him shuck his chute at three hundred feet and free-fall onto an air mattress mea-

suring forty feet on a side—you begin to get some insight into what Group Two is all about.”

“That’s lunacy.”

“Not lunacy, Stubblefield. It’s the rush you get from taking the ultimate risk. Danger for the hell of it.”

“Why not just wait for a good electrical storm,” I said, “and go sit on the roof with your head wrapped in tinfoil?”

Stark laughed. “But now you’ve removed all skill from the equation. The optimal event combines skill, a few variables, and a bit of chance. Several of us get together regularly and devise interesting challenges for ourselves. Ideally, we will prevail by virtue of our skill and our nerves. Of course, there’s chance, which can’t be manipulated. And therein lies the attraction. There are no guarantees.”

“Okay, so you, Eng, Mickey, and a few other dipwads run around in the woods shooting each other with splatter-paint guns and race motorcycles in the rain. What’s that got to do with Johnny?”

“Johnny didn’t make the grade.” Stark sipped his brandy. Eng yawned. “I had high hopes for him, too. He fit the profile: a combat veteran, highly trained, tough, bored stiff with his job. After the vicissitudes of combat, selling

tennis rackets and processing order forms is as exciting as a round of croquet, don’t you agree?” He smiled indulgently. “Take a look at yourself. Why is a combat veteran who also has a college degree looking through keyholes for a living?”

He had a point. I’d tried a few regular jobs and found that I was unfit for normal employment. And, as Stark had implied, there were darker impulses. Many times, driving on deserted highways at night, I shut off my lights and drive for miles by moonlight or starlight, usually at very high speeds. I also like hang gliding, and only some weird sense of decorum has kept me so far from bungee jumping.

I said, “You should get out more, Stark. Keyholes are scarcer these days than business ethics.” I stood up. “Let’s cut the crap, shall we? Johnny didn’t do drugs, and he wouldn’t sell them. And guys like Eng don’t walk around with guns because they carry receipts to the bank a couple of times a week. Johnny crossed you up somehow, and you whacked him. You put some bits in his pockets, took his money and his watch, and broke his skull, all to make it look like someone jacked him up and robbed him. It seems unlikely to me that you’d go to

all that trouble just because Johnny wouldn't jump off tall buildings holding an umbrella or go rollerskating on the third rail with you."

Stark sighed. Eng looked ready for a nap. From the woods around the house came a chorus of birdsong. For a moment I was able to hear the booming of the surf about a mile away.

"Johnny had no fear," said Stark at last. "And that's the point, isn't it? Take away the fear of death, and what would a man be capable of? The answer is, just about anything." He stood up and stretched.

"Think of our little organization as a business, Stubblefield. We're contractors. Someone needs something done, something both difficult and dangerous. We take the job."

"You forgot to mention illegal."

"Yes, illegal. Like dealing drugs. You're wrong about Johnny, by the way. He didn't use and he wouldn't personally traffic in drugs, but he had no objection to the organization's engaging in such activities. Nor did he mind that we used our considerable expertise to commit arson or to steal expensive and well-guarded objects." He smiled brightly. "You'd be amazed how many people there are who need buildings burned

down or who just have to have a particular painting or piece of jewelry. We've been approached to carry out assassinations. We're not prepared to go that far. Yet."

"Except for Johnny."

"Johnny balked at our weapons supply operations. We are, without exception, combat veterans. Procuring weapons is not particularly taxing—expensive, but not difficult. And we are uniquely situated here on Cape Cod for clandestine shipping. It's a long dark coast and a big ocean. And so very many people seem to be in need of weapons these days.

"Johnny became very self-righteous. It seems that his wartime experience had a bad effect on him. I did my best to explain it. I mean, selling guns to people who need them is *rational*. They're going to get them somewhere, after all. 'Why us?' he asked. I told him the same thing Willie Sutton said when he was asked why he robbed banks: because that's where the money is.

"He wouldn't hear me. At that point he became a liability. If we can extend the metaphor, I made a sound business decision: I pinkslipped him. I couldn't very well take a chance on his going to the authorities because of some mis-

guided ideas concerning the immorality of war."

He sat down and worked on the brandy some more.

"Barry here has no use for you. And Mickey, well—" He shrugged. "But I could use a man like you. You're quite a bit like Johnny, you know."

"Screw you, Stark," I said. Eng chuckled from his perch on the windowsill and scratched his forehead with the barrel of the automatic.

"I told you," he said.

"Ah well," said Stark. "That simplifies things. I hope you are prepared to join the majority, Stubblefield."

The birds had stopped singing. I could hear the surf clearly now as it kissed the shoreline. I figured it might be the last sound I'd ever hear.

Eng straightened suddenly, looking out the open window, gun pointed now at the trees.

"What—"

The bullet took him in the chest and punched him back into the room. He sprawled on the floor on his back, waving his arms and legs like a man being rolled by a heavy surf. Then he stopped.

I went over the desk after Stark, who was grabbing at one of the drawers. There was no technique to my assault, no fancy moves or subtleties. Just a raw animal urge to strangle

the life out of him. I was doing just that when they finally managed to pull me off.

We had lunch at The Rudder a few days later. Eddie Olivera was eating the special, which was macaroni and cheese. It was one of the bravest things I'd ever seen him do. The smell reminded me of a locker room.

"We had an infinity mike on the phone so we could listen in even when the phone wasn't in use. Also had a guy with a shotgun mike out in the woods monitoring things. That's probably who Eng spotted. A state police tac team sniper took Eng out." He took a large mouthful of the special. I couldn't watch.

"They made a mistake when they grabbed you. That's kidnapping, and it gave us an opening. Hey, you ought to try some of this."

"That's okay, really."

"I knew you'd keep at it. You're a persistent bastard when you get on something. Sooner or later they'd have to decide you were becoming a problem. That's why we told you to back off." He beamed. "Because I knew that would make you more determined." He tapped his head with a blunt forefinger. "Cement-headed."

"Thanks a lot."

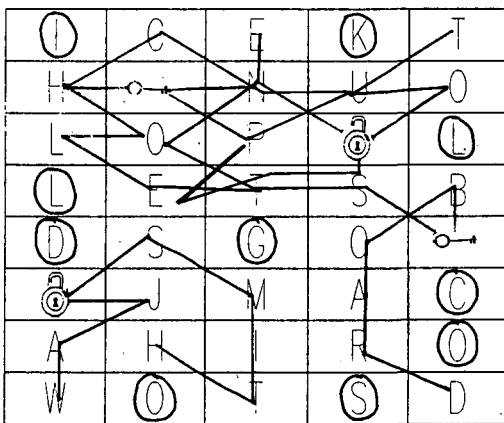
"Hey, if we hadn't been there, you'd be feeding the fishies about now." Another mouthful. "These guys were bigtime, especially the gunrunning. We've established that they were in touch with various terrorist groups. They were even talking to people from Yugoslavia, or whatever it's called now."

"Whatever happened to sand dunes, salt sea air, and quaint little villages here and there?"

Olivera gestured with his fork. A blob of cheese adorned the corner of his mouth. And he said one of the most profound things I'd ever heard him utter.

"Charles, you can't put your foot in the same river twice because, like it or not, there's new water flowing in. New water flowing in all the time."

SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":



When unscrambled, the unused letters spell "Goldilocks."

1. Keyboard
2. Keyhole
3. Keynote
4. Keypunch
5. Keystone
6. Lockjaw
7. Locknut
8. Lockout
9. Locksmith
10. Lockstep
11. Lockup

The General's Task Force

by Pearl G. Aldrich

“I have something for the Task Force.” Colonel Jackson’s voice was always cloak-and-daggerish when she reported a case. “It’s a bad one, Top. The woman’s afraid even to walk from the Annex to the barracks.”

The Navy Annex, which housed Marine Corps Headquarters, is across the street from Henderson Hall where the barracks are located. Both are a couple of blocks up the hill from the Pentagon, all tucked into urban northern Virginia.

“Has she been assaulted, ma’am?” The Task Force handled sexual harassment (physical) differently from sexual harassment (administrative).

“Not yet,” the colonel assured me, “but it could happen any time.”

“Enlisted woman, male officer?” I reached for a case entry form. “Enlisted man, woman officer? Two enlisted people? Two officers?”

“Enlisted woman, one male officer, one non-com. A major and a sergeant. She’s a PFC.”

It was a bad one, all right. Two career men had ganged up on a woman just two years into her first enlistment. She had joined the Corps right out of high school. Miracle she hadn’t turned to drugs or gone on unauthorized absence. But she’d endured the harassment with strength and courage. The men, reaching across her for papers, had rubbed an arm against her breasts, cupped a hand on her buttock whenever they stood beside her, and whispered sexual innuendos nonstop all day.

While I was recording the details, the sergeant’s name, George Castleman, echoed in my head. Castle? Cas? I couldn’t make the connection.

The report was printing out when the general marched in. As usual when she went by, I heard a band playing, saw colors flying and troops passing in review. A tall, stately blonde, she looked grand in dress blues. My husband says I think any woman in military uniform looks good. “And don’t we?” I always challenged him, but it’s an amicable argument. After

all, we met, married, and remained in the Corps.

Anyhow, I first saw the general on parade, and the impression never faded. She hadn't made general yet, and I wasn't a top sergeant. Officially, my rank is sergeant major, but "Top" is Marine-speak for the highest enlisted rank. I'm told I'm one of the youngest women ever to make it.

"Top," the general called from her office where she was reading the forms I had handed her. As I entered, she said, "Real pieces of work, these two. I wonder how many women they've already worked over, driven out, et cetera. Perfect candidates for the cure."

Our program, Operation Cure and Prevent (CAP), is based on the old adage, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. The general pitched it to the Joint Chiefs of Staff when they were getting heat from the Senate Armed Services Committee and the media about sexual harassment.

The chiefs wanted a quick fix to get the media off their backs, so they bought the general's Task Force, announcing it as an experimental program. If successful, it would be exported to other duty stations, they told the television cameras, then forgot about it. Aides comman-

deered a couple of offices from the Manpower and Personnel Directorate and squeezed out a budget—all small—then they forgot it, too.

But the women didn't. I was one of a long line requesting assignment on the Task Force staff and was lucky enough to be selected. Then I discovered I was it, a staff of one. But the general overcame that. She put the word out for volunteers, and they poured in.

The general had opened the safe and taken out CAP's secret roster of a hundred carefully screened military and civil service women, plus a paid auxiliary that I'd named "Downtown Girls" from Washington's Fourteenth Street red light district. I never knew how she recruited them.

I sat down beside her desk, and in a few minutes we selected the thirty women for this alert. The general is easy to work for once you get used to her impersonal approach. Never a personal word either to you or about herself. As the Brits say, she kept herself to herself.

Back at my desk, calling for women for a night drill didn't take long because, after the problems of reaching them for training, I made sure every one had a telephone answering machine. When I finished saying,



"THE MARINE I CAME TO SEE MAY HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH WHO YOU
CAME TO SEE."

"CAP Alert. Night drill," and giving date, time, and place, I called my husband.

He was at home, on leave, getting ready to take our daughter to visit his parents in Iowa. "Do you know a George Castleman?" I asked. "The name seems familiar to me."

Len laughed. "Don't you remember?" he asked. "When we were in Germany? That over-age-in-grade sergeant who hit on you every time we saw him at Koenigshof?" That was our favorite beer garden in Stuttgart.

"Oh, of course," and I had a flashback of a squat, belligerent man who looked like a frog, bulging eyes and all.

"Old Cassy must be about due for retirement," Len said—and old enough to be that PFC's father, I added silently. "He used to be a hard charger, drank hard, fought hard, chased women even harder. You know the type, think they're the only *real* Marines left and hang together to drink and grouse."

"His wife must put up with a lot," I commented.

Len didn't answer for a few seconds. "You know, hon, I'm not sure he had one." He carefully didn't ask why I wanted to know but, like the great guy he is, generously gave additional information.

I never told Len what the Task Force did, but the way things got around the Corps—a worldwide gossip factory—he knew and was wondering where Cassy figured. But we'd agreed long ago not to interfere in each other's careers. Over time, we'd developed an attitude of "I'll be blind, but don't expect me to be stupid."

While the general was on the phone, collecting background on the men, I hopped the shuttle to the Annex to check out the woman and the situation. Not all women reporting sexual harassment were on the side of the angels, and we might have to abort the Alert. It had happened before, and to prevent it, I'd gotten pretty good at evaluating the woman and the situation.

From the Annex bus stop, I climbed the flight of broken steps, passed the guard, and headed for the Marine Corps Headquarters entrance, then up the ladder to the inspector general's wing on the second deck. When I reached the right office, I saw PFC Smithson sitting at her computer at the back of the usual closetlike space. Sergeant Castleman, unmistakably the same, was at a desk near the door, and the major had his own small office off to the side.

"Cassy," I said, entering the office. "Private Smithson is being reassigned. Her relief will report tomorrow."

"Well, of all people!" he exclaimed, standing up. "How the hell are you! What's old Len doing? Both of you stationed here now?"

He rattled on as though we were buddies while I looked Smithson over. She was spruce and trim in her uniform—what my father called bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and what I judged to be well brought up, respectful, and diligent. She glanced at me curiously. Colonel Jackson had told her someone would contact her, but she didn't know who or when.

When Castleman had made all he could of our very brief acquaintance, I told Smithson, "Get your personal gear, private, and come with me. Now!" The command in that last word was for Castleman, not Smithson.

As she began stuffing things into her purse, a voice called from the major's office. "Private, get your ass in . . ." he started, but Castleman cut him off.

"Major, Smithson's ordered out," his voice full of syrupy regret. When the major appeared in his doorway, Castleman introduced us. By the time we

completed protocol, Smithson was ready and eager to leave.

Rather than wait twenty minutes for the next shuttle, I flagged a taxi. "Pentagon, River Entrance," I told the driver. During the short drive, I asked Smithson, "How did you hear about the Task Force?"

Her answer was one I had grown to expect: "One of the noncoms in the barracks told me."

"What did she tell you?"

"Just that it was a way to exit a bad situation without a major flap." Her eyes filled with tears and she dug out a Kleenex, apologizing as she did so. "I'm sorry, Top. I know I'm not living up to standards, but they just wore me down."

"That's all right, Smithson," I said sympathetically. "They don't prepare you for this kind of stress in boot camp."

"I sure didn't expect it. I thought if I did a good job, worked as hard as I could, I'd be okay," she went on.

"Not in this man's world, but this really has nothing to do with you as a person. It's a power play. Why didn't you request mast?" I asked, knowing from Colonel Jackson that she didn't request permission to see her commanding officer.

"I was afraid I'd get in trouble." Another familiar answer.

The taxi dropped us as close to the entrance as it could get, and we headed into the Pentagon. She stopped at the head to pull herself together before meeting the general, and I continued to the office, reporting the Alert was a go. Smithson wasn't out for revenge or on an ego trip.

When Smithson reported to the general, her shoulders were squared, back rigid, apprehension in every line. The general said, "At ease, private. As of now, you're reassigned to Personnel at "A" Company. Report to Captain Livingston at 0800 hours tomorrow, but before you're dismissed today, I need your story. Sit down and start at the beginning. What happened?" Then she closed the door. Smithson was going to be fine. It was now Castleman's and the major's turn.

That evening, after taking Len and Carolyn to National Airport, I returned to the Pentagon for the briefing. We mustered in the conference room of Strategic Plans and Policies Directorate on the second deck of E Ring. One of those accidentally appropriate assignments, I thought.

Implementing CAP was a complex administrative operation, but the general had honed to the max her major talent for manipulating military paper-

work. Accessing the volunteers' time when needed and putting a contract in place to fund the Downtown Girls were part of her administrative magic.

When everyone was present, the general began the briefing from the forms I'd initiated, then said, "We'll administer the cure to the major exclusively during duty hours. Castleman is the primary target. He's a hard case."

Castleman had a long history of fighting and causing various types of disruptions. The shrink's diagnosis, antisocial personality disorder, included aggressive sexual behavior with an inability to form a lasting intimate relationship with a woman. As I remembered, dodging him was a daily supplement to the morning run.

"He was a drill instructor at Parris Island, but was relieved of duties for thumping. Translated into civilian, that means hitting recruits or using other harsh physical treatment in the name of training," the general explained.

Mention of PI brought back the scuttlebutt that went around the post when Castleman arrived in Germany. Word was that one of his recruits had been permanently injured, although Cassy hadn't been court-martialed or even charged with an offense.

After a short Q&A, the general read the roster of women to replace Smithson and spread large helpings of sauce over those two ganders. We needed a group. Although the men enjoyed the sexual fun at first, they soon tired of it and requested the woman be replaced. She was—with another Task Force member who continued ladling out the sauce. I provided Castleman's address to the Downtown Girls so they could link up with him off duty.

But Cassy's case went off the rails from the beginning. For starters, he reacted with anger. The corporal who replaced Smithson reported that Cassy shoved her into a filing cabinet and hissed in her ear, "Keep your hands off me, girl, or I'll put you on report."

"Back off," the general told her. "Concentrate on the major," and increased the number of women on duty in the halls.

We didn't limit the laying on of hands to women working in the target's office but placed others all over the building and in all the lines—cafeteria, credit union, dry cleaners. The only place a man could get away was in the head, and how many times a day could you go there?

I usually spent some time in the halls also, keeping track of what was going on. This time,

I also kept an eye on Cassy. As the pressure built, he looked angrier and angrier, and I instructed the women to act quickly and move out fast. I didn't want anyone punched out.

Cassy's reaction to the Downtown Girls conformed to the pattern only for the first night. The Girls reported that he welcomed them, laughed, and said, "Ah, my boys. What'll they think of next?" when they said a friend had sent them as a gift—the reason they always gave.

Most men kept going three to five nights before trying to cry off, but on the second night, Cassy told the Girls to take the night off. He'd tell the boys they'd been, but of course they stayed. The third night, he wouldn't let them in, yelling through the door, "Go away and don't come back." It created a little rumpus, but they forced their way inside. When they reported, they told me they didn't know if they'd be able to get in the next night. If they couldn't, they didn't want to lose their money. I assured them they wouldn't.

Meanwhile, back at headquarters, the major crumbled on the fourth day—the fastest on record—begging the corporal to leave him alone. Please just leave me alone. What kind

of woman are you? Why are you doing this to me? I never did anything to you.

When the general got that report, she paid her official visit, SOP when the pressure took effect. She would sit beside the man's desk and ask, "Does the saying, 'What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander,' mean anything to you?"

When they got it, they agreed they now knew what sexual harassment felt like. God, did they know! To a man, they promised on the Bible, on their mother's grave, on their firstborn child, they would never, ever do it again. They were cured for life. "Honest to God, ma'am, *never* again!" This time, as the major escorted her to the door, he said, "Don't worry about me, ma'am. I never acted that way before. I don't know what got into me."

I was watching them nearby, waiting for Cassy to report for duty—he was showing up later every day—or I'd have seen him come stamping down the hall. As the major turned back to his office, the general turned toward the hall and met Cassy face to face.

In her unflappable way, she asked, "Does 'What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander' mean anything to you?"

Saying, "Excuse me, ma'am," in a voice that only his years in

the Corps kept polite, he carefully stepped around her into the office and stood behind his desk. She turned and stood looking at him. I moved into the doorway and looked at him, too. He looked dreadful: deep, black circles under his eyes with fatigue in every wrinkle. I almost felt sorry for him.

"I asked you a question, sergeant," the general said quietly.

With effort and without expression, he answered, "I know what it means, ma'am . . ." his eyes flashed anger ". . . and where it's coming from. Every man at headquarters knows."

"This treatment will continue until you put in for retirement," the general told him. "Do it or I'll initiate charges that will result in a dishonorable discharge and loss of pension." She turned smartly, I stepped aside, and she marched down the hall. The band was still echoing in my head as I turned back to Cassy.

He was glaring through the door. "Damn bitch," he snarled. "Every base she's been on she's hassled guys just having a little fun." He turned the glare on me. "And you, what the hell you doing, working for *her*? How the hell Len let you . . ."

"Shut up, Cassy," I ordered, "and sit down," but he'd already flung himself into his

chair, full of fury and frustration, still snarling. "Goddamn bull dyke. A real man oughtta bust her ass . . ."

"Cassy!" I broke in, slamming my hands on his desk, leaning over, and putting menace in my low pitched voice. "Clean your mouth! Or I'll have it cleaned for you officially!" My mother, a Marine in World War II, had warned me when I enlisted that the men would call you a lesbian if you had women friends and a whore if you dated men. She was right, and the gossip never stopped. Because she was such a loner, the general's sexual preference caused more speculation than usual.

Cassy was breathing hard but shut up, and I moved into the chair beside his desk. "The commandant supports this project," I said. "Do as the general said or I guarantee you'll lose your benefits."

"Don't worry, I'll get my benefits . . ." the sneer was loud and clear " . . . and a lot more. My boys are taking care o' that. Nothin' that bi . . ." he looked at me and shifted ground " . . . nothin' she can do to queer that." He propped his head on his hands. "Benefits. What a crock. Hash marks up to my elbow and still a sergeant. And a *woman* made gen-

eral!" The contempt in his voice was corrosive.

Then he turned on me. "Even you got promoted over me. While you were walking around the base in a maternity uniform. *Maternity* uniform, for Chri'sake. A *Marine* in a maternity uniform! God-almighty!" He stopped and looked down at his hands, clenched on his desk. Then he looked me straight in the eye with the sincere look guys like that put on when they want to con you. "What did Smithson tell you about me?"

"You mean how you harassed her?"

"Harassed, hell!" he snorted. "Just fun and games, and she couldn't take it. Some Marine she is. No, I mean about my personal business."

"What she said is confidential." Smithson hadn't said anything, but I wasn't going to tell him until I knew what he was after. Unfortunately, he didn't pursue it.

"Get the hell out of here," he ordered. "Go home where you belong. I got work to do."

I didn't move. "Why'd you re-up every time?" I asked. "You didn't have to."

"That was the deal," he said. "Deal?" I echoed.

"C'mon, you're no recruit. You know what happened at PI. Everybody in the world

knows," meaning the Corps. That's our world. "No court martial, no promotion, no nothing; just thirty lousy years of nothing. They wouldn't even send me to Nam." He heaved a sigh. "I thought they'd forget after a couple years, but at the end of every hitch, someone showed up to remind me."

"What happened to the recruit?"

He bent his head over the desk. "Paraplegic," he muttered.

"And you thought they'd forget?" I exclaimed.

"He was a pantywaist, a sissy, prob'ly a fag . . ."

"And you were going to make a man out of him," I broke in.

"Naw, I was going to make a Marine outa him. Something you and her . . ." nodding toward the door " . . . don't know nothing about. It was a' accident, for Chri'sake. Afterwards I wanted out, court martial, admin discharge, one way or the other. I coulda started over, maybe been a cop, made chief by now, but the kid was a relative of Chesty Puller's, for Chri'sake, and the family didn't want no publicity." General Puller was a Marine's Marine. Of course no one would forget.

I stood up. "Put your papers in, Cassy. I'll make sure they're processed on the double."

I was so downhearted when I left, I was almost home when I mentally kicked myself for not asking who his boys were. The Downtown Girls said he thought his boys arranged for their visit, and he said they were making sure he had more than his pension to retire on. Who could they be? He had no sons; at least, none he claimed. He hadn't been assigned to a company since Parris Island, and I didn't think he was into Scouts or Big Brothers. Not the type.

When the phone rang, it was after midnight. I was just dozing off and jumped for it, scared something had happened to Len or Carolyn, but all I heard at first was a jumble of sounds, then a woman yelling, "Get Top, get Top."

"Yes?" I asked. "Who's this? What's wrong?"

A calm voice said in the background, "I'll talk to her," then in my ear, "Top, can you come to our place? Something happened, and Yvonne's freaked."

I recognized the calm voice as one of the Downtown Girls but not on this alert; Yvonne was on Cassy's team.

"I'll be right there," I said, reaching for my clothes. "Try to calm her."

The Downtown Girls lived in a garden apartment on Alexandria's west side. When Rachel let me in, I could see Yvonne flaked out on the couch. She looked as though she'd been in a fight. Her hair was straggling, and her makeup smeared. One satin sequined shoe lay on the floor, its three inch heel broken off, the other shoe lay on the floor. Her black lace pantyhose and slinky, skintight hot pants were ripped.

I took her hand, her fingers with their clawlike false nails and their glittering designs clutching tight. "What happened, Yvonne? Did he assault you?" I asked.

"He didn't do nothin'. He's dead. Blood all over 'im. Flat out dead . . ."

"Dead? What do you mean, dead?" I asked, my voice rising with shock and surprise.

"Whaddya mean what do I mean? Dead is dead. Whaddya think I mean?"

"You fought with him and killed him? Is that what you're telling me? Did you call the police?"

"Po-leese? You crazy or what?" Yvonne shrieked, sitting up, hair sticking out, long earrings flapping. "Me call po-leese? No way, no how, no ma'am. I jus' got my butt outa there."

"Chill out, Vonne," Rachel said. "Just chill out. Top'll handle this." Her soothing voice worked on me, too.

"Where's Sherry?" I asked quietly. "Wasn't she with you?"

"She talkin' to the man," said Yvonne. "We wife-in-laws. Rach, I'm dry." One shoe off and one shoe on, she limped into the kitchen while I looked questioningly at Rachel.

"We have the same husband," she said.

Bigamy? I thought, totally bewildered.

"Our man," Rachel said impatiently. It still took me a minute to realize she meant "pimp." This was as close to their real life as I'd come. They came to briefings dressed like everyone else and on the phone, we talked about their assignments as though they were doing office work.

When Yvonne returned, glass in hand, I asked, "What happened? How did your clothes get all ripped up? Did he do it?" I was assuming they had a brawl, she and Sherry knocked Cassy out, then panicked, thinking he was dead. "You got to Sergeant Castleman's apartment as usual?" I prompted, and she nodded. "Then what happened?"

"We knocked, he didn't answer, and Sherry goes, 'We gonna break in?' an' I go, 'On'y

if we hafta," so we knock some more. Call his name. Bang on the door, an' it just open'." She paused to take a swallow from her glass. "He was in the living room, deader'n a mackerel, so we hightailed outa there."

"If you didn't fight with him, how'd you get so messed up?" I didn't really believe her story.

"Sherry an' me, we got our feet all mixed up and fell down the stairs. Honest to Gawd, Top, that's what happened."

"What are you going to do?" Rachel asked as I stood up and slung my purse on my shoulder.

"I don't know yet," I said. "The first thing is to check Cassy out. See what condition he's in."

"I tole you!" Yvonne yelled. "He's dead!"

"I'll be in touch later," I said as I went to the door.

Back home, I paced the living room, trying to develop a plan. I knew Marine regs inside out, but no regulation I ever heard of covered this situation. When the general told me the day I reported that CAP was breaking new ground, I didn't know how truly she spoke.

I drank two pots of coffee, waiting for morning. The general was on duty promptly at 0700 hours every day. Two minutes past the hour, I dialed the office and reported the situ-

ation and my suspicions, recommending that we turn the problem over to civilian authorities.

The line was silent for a few seconds, then she said, "No, CAP can't be involved, and the connection between the Downtown Girls and CAP must be kept out of sight. However, top priority is to determine Castleman's condition. Start at his quarters," and she hung up.

Oh, hell, that's the last place I want to go, I muttered, even as I got the map of Northern Virginia. As I drove, I saw Cassy lived in an older section of Alexandria, mostly boxlike, red brick, two story, one-family houses and boxlike, red brick, four story apartment houses.

When I turned off Mt. Vernon Avenue onto Cassy's street, I could see a lot of cars and people bunched near the end of the next block. As I got closer, the cars turned out to be police, some people moving purposefully about, some just rubbernecking. I parked and joined the rubberneckers, comparing Cassy's address with the one where all the activity was taking place. As I feared, they were the same, one of the four story apartment houses. I got as far as the front door when a uniformed police officer stopped me.

"You can't go in right now," she said. "Do you live here?" She was taking in my uniform.

"I've come to see another Marine who lives here," I said. "Someone have an accident or a fight?"

"Are you a relative?" she asked.

I shook my head. "We're stationed together." That covered it without lying.

"Wait here a minute," and she walked back into the building. She returned with a man in a business suit who started from square one. "Do you live here, miss?"

"Sergeant," I corrected automatically. "No, as I told the officer, I came to see a Marine who lives here. Why are you asking?"

"Are you a close friend of his?" he asked, ignoring my question.

"His?" I countered. I had to find out if they were here because of Cassy. "What makes you think it's a man?"

"Just answer my question," he said.

"No, I won't answer your question until I know why you're asking and what your authority is. The Marine I came to see may have nothing to do with who you came to see."

He tried to stare me down, but it didn't work. Finally he

said, "Come on inside." He led the way to a small alcove that held mailboxes and two beat-up wing chairs. "There's a man upstairs with Marine uniforms in his closet and his I.D. says he's one George Donald Castleman, sergeant. Is that who you came to see?"

"Yes," I said. "Why are you going through his apartment? What's the problem?"

"Don't worry. We leave things as neat as we find 'em. You his girlfriend, his . . . uhm . . . significant other?"

"No. I told you. We're stationed together."

"Why are you here?"

"Why are you?"

"Stop wasting time," he said irritably. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't serious."

"Serious?" I echoed. "Is he injured? Who are you?"

"Detective Alexander Rojas, Alexandria Police Department," he said, automatically reaching into a pocket for his I.D. "Yes, he's been injured."

"How bad?" I didn't dare ask if George was dead.

"Tell me your name first."

I told him my name, then added, "Cassy'd been looking pretty bad the last few days, reporting for duty later and later, so before the major put him on report, I came over to see if he was SIQ—that is, sick in quar-

ters," hoping that would move things on.

"And that's it?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. That's it. Is he badly injured?" but the detective just asked, "Where's he stationed?"

"Quit playing cat and mouse with me, Detective Rojas. We have procedures to follow when a noncommissioned officer is injured."

"I know," he said. "There's lots of military living around here. Sergeant Castleman was fatally assaulted last night, but I couldn't tell you until I knew if you were close . . ." As his voice went on about an autopsy and notifying next of kin, I reached out for one of the chairs and sat down. My God, those women *did* kill him, I thought. How can we keep CAP out of it now? The whole program will go down the drain. My thoughts were skittering about when I picked up a note of urgency in the detective's voice. "Miss? Are you all right? Miss?"

"Sergeant," I repeated. "Who killed him? How did he die?"

"We don't know yet. The neighbor who found him heard loud voices and banging around several nights recently. Women coming and going, just generally lots of commotion."

"How did he die?" I repeated. "Shot? Stabbed? What?"

"He was hit on the head repeatedly," Rojas said. Blood all over him, Yvonne had said.

"I must get back," I said, standing up. "He was assigned to the Inspector General's Section, Headquarters, Marine Corps. Report the death to headquarters and liaise with the MP's. I'll notify our people," meaning the general. "I'd like to visit his quarters for a minute," maybe I'd see something, although I had no idea what, "and talk to the neighbor who found him."

"Sorry, no can do. It's a crime scene, and we're not finished yet. The I.D. people are there, and the neighbor is down at headquarters making a statement. That is, if she's calmed down, she's making a statement. Thanks for saving me some time, sergeant," he went on. "I don't have to go through the whole routine with the military personnel locator."

I just nodded and moved out to my car. The rubberneckers had mostly left, and the street was back to its residential mid-morning quiet. Now that I know, what do I do first? I thought as I drove back to Mt. Vernon Avenue. Report to the general or question Yvonne and Sherry? I don't recall making a conscious decision, but like a homing pigeon, the car just headed for the Pentagon.

The general was waiting for my report. "We're up to our ears in alligators, ma'am," I started, walking into her office and closing the door.

"No way can we keep CAP out of this," I concluded. "The neighbor who found him talked about the women. The police will find them, and the publicity will kill CAP." I started pacing agitatedly. "It was working so well, really ready to export to other stations." In fact, I was doing a final scrub on a report recommending just that. "Now it's all going down the drain . . ."

"There are ways to handle this without endangering CAP, Top," the general said. "I'll talk to the two women. Tell them I'm on my way," and she marched out.

I called Yvonne, getting her out of bed and grumpy, then I caught the Metro to Pentagon City, one stop from the Pentagon itself, and went to a restaurant in the mall where I could sit quietly with a glass of wine and think.

Totally unlikeable as Cassy was, I'd rather he had left the Corps a retiree. On the other hand, I couldn't forget the recruit he might just as well have murdered.

But that wasn't the current problem, and I switched from the moral to the practical.

Yvonne and Sherry had probably killed Cassy accidentally. They'd made no effort to hide their presence, yelling back and forth with Cassy through the door. They'd clattered up and down the stairs. They'd been noticed, and they'd be found. My problem was damage control.

For that, I needed to know what the police were doing. Would that detective tell me anything? Probably not, but I'd try anyhow, I decided as I paid for lunch and went back to my office. When I reached the detective, he was very cordial but only because he wanted information.

"I'm glad you called, sergeant," he said. "You can fill in some of the blanks about Castleman. The neighbors say he was frequently seen in the company of teenage boys and one, at least, must have been his son. You can save me valuable time if you tell me where the boy lives. It'll take two weeks going through your procedures."

They must have been the ones Cassy called "my boys," but I wasn't ready to share that with the detective yet.

"I can check it out," I told him. "Can you give me a few more details? Did they live with him or visit at regular times, like weekends? You

know, the way kids do after a divorce."

"Apparently nothing regular."

"The neighbor who found him?" I suggested.

"Mrs. Gonzales? Naw, she works nights in a restaurant. That's how she came to find him, coming home late. Going upstairs, she saw his door open and . . ." He stopped as he remembered who he was talking to. "Call me when you get the address."

"Right," I said. Yes, sir, I'll execute your order immediately, but for CAP. I called Cassy's office and asked the corporal if he kept a personal file there.

"You know he's dead?" she asked. "I can't find one. The major was looking, too. He wasn't a nice man, Sergeant Castleman, but it's a shame anyway." After a moment's silence, she asked in a low voice, "Will people blame his death on the Task Force?"

"I hope not. Is the major in?"

When he came on the line, I said the appropriate things, then asked, "Can you tell me where his son and wife, or ex-wife, live? The police need the address." I hoped he was too shocked to ask me why the police didn't go through channels. Or why I was even in contact with the police.

"He never mentioned dependents."

"Did he ever say 'my boys' or anything to give the impression he had children? Or he was working with a boys' club?"

The major came up negative, so I called several of Len's friends. They all knew Cassy and told me old gossip. One of them had served with him in Hawaii and confirmed what Len had suspected: Cassy never married. He also confirmed my evaluation that Cassy wasn't into community service.

Before I could do anything else, the phone started to ring nonstop. News of Cassy's death was getting around headquarters, and Task Force members were concerned. Several women said they'd served with Cassy at various stations, but nothing new surfaced.

When the general got back, she looked very worried. "I'm satisfied the Girls are in the clear," she announced, going into her office and closing the door. I wasn't, but I didn't have time to develop a strategy to find out what her decision was based on. Visiting Mrs. Gonzales, the neighbor who found Cassy, was next on my agenda, so I put the Downtown Girls on the back burner.

At home, I changed my uniform for civilian slacks and a sweater, called Len at his folks'

and talked to everybody. It was so comforting to hear their voices, warm and loving. It really set me up.

All was quiet when I reached Cassy's apartment house. No police, but no parking, either. Everyone was home from work. I parked in a restaurant lot on the corner of Mt. Vernon Avenue.

Cassy's apartment was on the top deck, and I assumed Mrs. Gonzales lived nearby if she had to pass his door on her way home. I planned to knock loudly on his door, and when no one answered, I'd knock on hers. But I didn't have to. After I called, "Cassy!" in my command voice, which could carry clearly across a drill field during a fly by, a harried looking woman, with eyes red from crying, stuck her head out of the door across the hall.

"You a relative?" she asked.

If I hadn't known Cassy was dead, that question would have seemed peculiar, but I answered, "No. A friend."

"You come before in the nigh?" I shook my head, moving toward her.

"Something wrong?" I asked sympathetically, a sympathy I really meant even if the rest was playacting.

She nodded, wiped her eyes, and opened her door with a gesture inviting me in. Her apart-

ment looked as though it had just been cleaned for a white glove inspection.

"Sit down, sit down." She hustled a bucket of cleaning stuff to the kitchen. "Is terrreeble." She rolled the r's with extra emphasis and sat down, too. "I send my 'usband with children to my sister. I don't go to work tonigh' but I must do something." She was twisting her hands in her lap. "The sergeant, he's dead." I gasped and looked suitably shocked, and she nodded understandingly. "I fin' him last nigh' when I come home from work. Terrreeble! Terrreeble!"

She was a waitress in the restaurant at the corner where I'd parked and had noticed Cassy's door open when she got home after work. That was unusual, so she called his name several times and stuck her head in. She thought his apartment had been robbed while he was out, but she found him. She didn't add much to what I'd pieced together from Yvonne and the detective, but told it with graphic detail, crying and twisting her hands. It had been awful for her.

"Why did you ask if I'd come other nights?" I asked when she'd calmed down.

"Women come," she said with a shrug. "Men, too. I don't see. I just hear sometime before I go

to work. My 'usband say sometime men come later, too. Make much noise."

"Were you friends? You and your husband and the sergeant? Talk together?" I was floundering, out of my element. I couldn't say anything like, "Corporal, I want a straight answer and I want it now!"

"No, not friends. We say 'hello,' 'how you are.' No more. At restaurant, he order food, talk more, but not friends."

I leaped at her mention of the restaurant. "He ate there a lot?"

"Oh yes, many times," she said with the first smile I'd seen. "He love food of my country, but no *salsa*. Too hot, he say," and she rubbed her stomach as he probably had done.

"Did the women and the young men eat with him?" I asked, wondering if the police knew that.

"Women, no," she replied. "Young men, sometime."

Cassy's boys? The teenagers the detective mentioned? "The same young men all the time?" I asked, feeling my way.

"Two, yes. Others sometime. One old, like sergeant. They know each other long time, he say."

"The two boys, what did they look like?"

She started to answer, but before she could, we heard

voices in the hall. Mrs. Gonzales and I looked at each other in surprise, then went to the door to see what was going on.

A natty little man stood with the general before Cassy's door, trying one key after another in the lock. She was in civilian slacks and a blue Jordache shirt and looked straight through me.

"Not to worry," he told Mrs. Gonzales. "I'm just showing this lady the sergeant's apartment. It won't be ready for occupancy until the end of the month, but I didn't think looking would hurt. Ahhh . . ." He turned the knob. "It wasn't locked after all. Very careless."

He opened it, and two guys tried to run through us, but four people clustered in the narrow doorway formed a solid barrier. They backed off, struggling to look cool, as though their actions had been perfectly normal.

"What are you boys doing here?" the natty little man asked fussily and stupidly broke the barrier to walk in and confront two muscular young men caught where they had no business to be. Fortunately for him, they retreated the few steps of the short hall to fidget in the opening to the living room. I closed ranks so the general and I filled the doorway, but Mrs. Gonzales

pushed between us and the little man, walking toward the two boys.

"You," she said. "I know you. You eat with sergeant in my restaurant. He killed last night, and police want to ask about him. Come, I give you detective number." She was almost face to face with them when she gasped. "What you do? Police leave room nice."

The two flashed signals at each other with their eyes, and the one with stringy blond hair said, "Cassy dead? We didn't know," but I didn't believe him. I'd dealt with too many Marines who sounded just like that when they were lying.

"Are you related to Cassy?" I asked. Unexpectedly, they both laughed, punching each other's arms.

"Well, no, lady, not exactly," the other one said. "More like brothers in arms, we might say," proud of being so clever.

"What kind of arms are you talking about?" asked the general.

"Huh? Whaddaya mean?" Smartass stalled for time.

"What're your names?" I asked, wondering how I could get them to stay put until I got the police here.

"Oh, just call us Tom and Jerry," said Smartass, back to speed.

"What are you doing here?" the general asked.

"We come over alla time," the blond said. "Cassy gave us a key. See?" He held it up by a metal ring.

"Why did you try to run when we opened the door?" she asked.

"Just surprised, that's all," Smartass said, shrugging. "No big deal."

"Mrs. Gonzales," I said, "please call the detective. We'll all wait here until he arrives."

"Sure, sure," she said and went out between the general and me. That's when the boys made their move, pushing through us and running down the stairs. Both the general and I started after them, but the fussy little man and Mrs. Gonzales got in our way and the street was empty when we got outside. They could be behind any bush or down any driveway, I thought, looking up and down the street.

I turned to the general, who was doing the same thing. "Ma'am, I'm going to call the police and describe those boys. You don't need to be involved." She nodded and, without a word, marched briskly toward Mt. Vernon Avenue.

God, I thought, walking back upstairs, if the media found out a woman general was involved in the murder of a male ser-

geant, all hell would break loose. Her reputation, her career—mine, too, probably—and CAP would die a very public death, and all the women's services would suffer. I hoped she gave the real estate agent a phony name.

On the landing, I saw the doors to both apartments were open. Mrs. Gonzales and the little man were talking in hers, so I went into Cassy's to look around. What did those boys want? They didn't find it, unless it was so small they could stick it in their tight jeans without a noticeable bulge.

Mrs. Gonzales was right. The living room was a mess, thoroughly ransacked. The bedroom was the same: mattress thrown off the bed, drawers dumped out on the floor, shoes and suitcases thrown out of the closet. The suitcases had been broken open and all Cassy's mementos—a photo album, plaques and mugs from his service stations—strewn about. In the closet, his dress blues hung in a plastic cleaners' bag alongside his other uniforms and a couple of civilian jackets. I looked around until I heard people coming up the stairs. It was Detective Rojas and another man.

"I'm not surprised to find you here," he said to me. "Not pleased, but not surprised. Mrs.

Gonzales said something about boys in the sergeant's apartment who attacked you and a woman who was eager to see his apartment. Is it *really* so desirable that she had to see it this very night?"

I only said, "Mrs. Gonzales was right. I got a good look at the two boys. I can give you their description."

"Where's the woman?" he asked.

"She left," I said. "Didn't want to be involved."

He gave me a sharp look but didn't say anything else. When I'd finished describing the boys, I agreed to go to his office and look at photos. He said he'd call when they were available.

By this time, Mr. Gonzales had come home and Mrs. Gonzales was crying again. That poor lady was having a very bad day. I told them goodbye, expressing my sympathy and hoping she'd get some rest, and went home.

The next morning, when I reported for duty, the general was reading the case file. I kept detailed reports on every Alert, and she had spotted Cassy's reference to "my boys" providing money to supplement his pension.

"They're the two last night," she announced with authority.

"Yes, ma'am. There might be more than two involved in this money-making operation."

"Drugs?" she asked. "Those two looked pretty clean."

"Yes, ma'am," I agreed. They didn't twitch, their noses didn't run, their reactions were good, their eyes and skin clear. "It's not usual, but they could sell it without taking it."

"It's a possibility."

"Those boys and the Down-town Girls might have met and tied up together."

"Absolutely not," the general said emphatically. "The Girls are out of it. Castleman was overseas often enough to develop contacts for drugs. Get a track on his assignments in the Middle and Far East."

"Yes, ma'am," I said and went to my desk to call Personnel. She really bought the Girls' story, I thought, but they were still my best bet. I couldn't think how, but what the boys were looking for had to figure somewhere in this mess. That was the first priority. I would focus on the Girls later.

The Personnel duty sergeant answered the phone, and I asked for Captain Wilson. She and I had served in Guam together and had been pretty close before she reported for Officer Candidate School. After we caught up with each other, I asked for a printout of Cassy's Eastern assignments, then took off for headquarters.

When I reached Cassy's office, the corporal was going through his desk. "The major asked me to clear it," she told me. "I'm going to put the files back into the cabinet and just toss the rest."

"I need to take a look," I said. "Pick up a printout from Captain Wilson in Personnel for me. And corporal..." she paused in the doorway "... take your time."

She smiled, understanding that I had no official status here, but I knew she'd figure it had something to do with CAP.

"Right, Top," and she took off.

If the civilian police came up with a reason to search Cassy's desk, they had to ask the MP's. That would take a while, so I had first crack at it.

I went through every file in the desk but found only official documents. I piled them on the corporal's workstation so she could refile them as she planned. Then I emptied all the drawers. At the back of one, I found several packets of pornographic pictures, really explicit. Hoping no one would walk in, I thumbed through them for notations or hidden notes. Nothing, so I ripped them up and buried them at the bottom of a trashcan.

Next, I pulled the drawers off their runners, stacked them to

one side, and crawled underneath the desk to see if anything was taped to the inner sides. Nothing there but dust, which I got all over my uniform shirt and slacks. Backing out, I knocked over the stack of drawers. The third one I picked up was upside down, and as I swung it over, the dividers fell out. One came apart, and an envelope dropped out. Inside the envelope was—wow!—a key. Am I Nancy Drew or what? Was there anything that explained it? No, the desk produced nothing more.

Sitting in Cassy's chair, I looked at my find. It could have been the key to everything. I couldn't tell what it fit by looking at it, but a locksmith probably could.

When the corporal returned, printout in hand, I asked her, "Do you know if the sergeant had a private business?"

"Sorry, Top, I really haven't been here long enough to know much about what goes on. How about the PFC I replaced? The woman they harassed?"

"Good idea," I told her and walked across Southgate Road to "A" Company in Henderson Hall. Captain Livingston, Smithson's new boss, and I had served together at Camp Pendleton. She was more than casually interested in CAP.

"Smithson is good," she told me. "I'm glad to have her aboard, but tell me about Sergeant Castleman. Do the police know who killed him?"

I shook my head. "I need to talk to Smithson, skipper."

"Sure thing, Top."

When Smithson reported, I asked, "Did you ever hear Sergeant Castleman refer to 'my boys'?"

"On the phone, he called a guy named Johnny 'my boy.' Just a joke, you know. I thought Johnny was one of the lifers he served with. They drank together a lot, and he rented a truck from him several times."

"Was the sergeant running a private business?"

"I don't know," Smithson said. "I didn't hang around him any more than I had to. I just couldn't help overhearing some things."

"Of course," I said. "I don't want to rake up painful memories, but I need one last item. Do you recognize this?" I handed the key to her, but she'd never seen it before.

"Top," she said hesitantly as she returned the key, "did I cause his death? You know, going to the Task Force?"

"Of course not," Captain Livingston and I said simultaneously. I continued, "You weren't the only one he ha-

rassed, just the one who had somewhere to go."

"And the courage to do it," the captain put in.

"Yes," I agreed. "His death is an external issue," hoping I was right.

After Smithson left, Captain Livingston asked, "What are you up to, Top?"

"Damage control. I need to find out what this key fits so I can point the police in that direction and away from CAP. Maybe one of Cassy's old buddies might know," thinking of Len's friends who'd served with Cassy. They'd know who his people were.

The captain reached for a copy of *Henderson Hall News* and flipped through it until she found the page she wanted. Folding the paper back, she handed it to me, pointing to the classified ads for trucking companies. Being owned by former Marines was the big pitch in every one. "Way to go. I was thinking only of active duty men."

"And look at this," she said, digging her key ring from her purse and laying one of the keys beside mine on her desk. "Very similar, aren't they?" I agreed. "It's for a heavy duty padlock. When I was assigned here and Joe went to Norfolk, we rented our house to the Pastors. You remember them?" I

nodded. "We put our stuff in one of those public storage places and we bought the best lock we could get."

"Hey, maybe we'll keep CAP alive, after all."

"Keep me posted," she said. "Anything I can do, let me know."

Crossing Southgate Road, I saw the shuttle waiting and ran for it. Back in the office, I put the printout of Cassy's Eastern assignments on the general's desk, sat down at mine, and planned what to say to the trucking companies. In the next couple of hours, I collected a lot of information about rates, times, and renting trucks before I found Cassy's old friend, Gunny Moore. From the day he made gunnery sergeant, only his mother, and maybe his wife, used his real first name.

I had started each call by saying, "Sergeant Castleman told me about your company..." and this man was the first to respond to the name.

"Good old Cassy," he boomed genially in my ear. "We go way back, y'know. Started together at PI. How is the old..." he coughed to give himself time to change the B word he was going to use to a polite one. "How's the old boy? Seen him recently?"

"Not for a couple of days," I replied truthfully. "I hear you did a lot of trucking for him."

"Hauled a few loads for him. Down the Carolinas."

"You hauled the loads?" I asked. "I must have misunderstood. I thought he rented trucks from you, and your rates were lower than U-Haul."

"Oh, well, yes and no. Actually, I don't rent trucks. I was just doing an old buddy a favor," and he swiveled away from the subject. "What can I do for you, sergeant?"

"Take some furniture out of storage and move it to my parents' house in Norfolk," I lied. Mom and Dad sold that house when they retired to Arizona.

"I reckon I can handle that," he said. "Where's your gear?"

"Same storage as Cassy's," I said, taking a shot in the dark.

"Well, he's got stuff in more than one of them places over on Pickett. Which one's yours?"

I couldn't answer that, so I bought some time. "You better give me some prices first, Gunny. Then I'll talk it over with my husband and we'll get back to you."

"Call any time," he said. "I'm usually here till twenty, twenty-one hundred. Most folks call after they get off duty," and I added his prices to all the others I'd collected. If anyone ever needs them, here they are, I

thought, making a file for them.

Those places over on Pickett, he had said, and that evening I followed Pickett's meandering path through Alexandria. On the west side, it became commercial. I saw four public storage places and decided to try Cassy's key in as many padlocks as I could. I couldn't get into one place without a coded gate card, but the next one was open. I drove in between two buildings—one, round, in the middle; the other, curved like a C, with solid walls facing the outside. I parked and, expecting a challenge from security any minute, tried the key in every padlock. Nothing on both counts.

The next one, up a small, steep hill, was built on the same principle but in a rectangle, the drive a straight line between the two buildings with the doors facing in. Here security was at least visible, but I showed the key to the guy who came to see what I was doing, and he went back to his television set.

At the tenth door, the key slid into the lock as though it had reached home. As I heaved the up-and-over door, I hoped I'd find the answer to Cassy's murder. If it was in what I found, I needed an interpreter. The area was a neatly arranged

warehouse, each row of boxes clearly labeled—TV's, VCR's, computers, printers, CD players, electronic typewriters.

Nothing sinister here, I thought as I closed the door and secured the padlock. Cassy had obviously started a business to supplement his pension and "my boys" worked for him. Damn and blast, I had thought I'd really found something; I drove home really pissed. It took a long conversation with Carolyn and Len to put me back in a good humor.

The next morning Detective Rojas called to tell me the pictures had come in. When could I go through them? "The sooner the better," I told him. "How about this afternoon?"

The general looked tired and worried, almost haggard when I went into her office. I wanted to say something sympathetic, but you couldn't with her—so business as usual. I laid on her desk a hard copy of what I fervently hoped would be the final version of the CAP report. Five drafts was more than enough. She handed me some routine paperwork and looked up with a touch of impatience when I didn't leave immediately.

"Ma'am, I have more information about Sergeant Castleman's activities . . ."

"Well?" she asked, giving me permission to continue by mo-

tioning to the chair near her desk. I told her about finding the key, Gunny Moore, and the storage space. "The police detective has some kind of photo lineup for me to look at this afternoon. Maybe I'll identify the boys, and the police can solve the murder without involving CAP."

"I know Sergeant John Moore," she said. "We served together on Okinawa. He's running a trucking company here?" I told her its name and address and left for my appointment.

The police department was in Alexandria's new Detention Center, a big red brick complex at the end of a maze of streets south of historic Olde Towne (established in 1749 the signs say), almost under the Capital Beltway.

When Rojas laid before me five yearbooks from T. C. Williams High School, I laughed. "All your criminals in high school?"

He looked uncomfortable but just said, "Don't bother with all the pictures. Just the seniors. Want some coffee?"

Even just the seniors was a big job—several hundred each year. At first, I enjoyed looking at the fresh, young faces—like recruits—but by book three, they all looked alike. Then I actually found one of the

boys—the smartass. His face was just as cocky two years ago as it had been the other night. The stringy blond turned up in the same book.

I sat back, feeling I'd really accomplished something this time, and looked around for Rojas. He'd gone about his business after he brought me the coffee. With partitions bracketing off each desk, I couldn't tell where everyone was, so I went looking.

He was sitting at a large table with a group of men and women, both uniformed and plainclothes. Everyone stopped talking when I appeared. "I found them," I announced. A babble broke out, while Rojas grinned with satisfaction. "The blond is Hurley Anderson and the other, Lazar White."

"Yah, yah," he crowed at his colleagues. "Thought I was off my head, didn't you?" Then he turned to me. "Thank you, sergeant. You've proved a point I've been trying to make for a couple of months. George," he looked at a uniformed patrolman, "get the sergeant some real coffee, not that slop we give visitors." George brought me not only a cup of great coffee, but a piece of pie, too. After three hours of heavy concentration, it hit the spot.

Those two boys worked for a company that cleaned stores

and offices, many of which had been robbed. The detectives working the robberies had noted that the company cleaned every one of the places and thought they had the thieves. Most of the crews were illegals, Hispanics with little English, but they all checked out. Always with large numbers of people the nights of the robberies. If they stole anything, the detectives figured it was one or two TV's or VCR's for their own use. Not the truckloads that had disappeared.

The few Anglos who took jobs with the cleaning service did so only until they could find something better. Except for these two. They had stayed with the company for a year and, according to the manager, become strong right arms.

"I keep my fingers crossed," she had told the police. "I expect them to vanish any minute because they can do better than this. In fact, they belong in college. They're reliable and conscientious; hard workers, too. Always ready to fill in for no-shows; and I have more of those than I care to count."

"You think they're the robbers?" I asked, my mind running immediately to Cassy's warehouse. That would point them away from CAP, even though the boys would proba-

bly tell them where Cassy's invoices were.

"Their alibis the nights of the robberies are ironclad," a woman in plainclothes said. "Would you believe, with their families every damn time?"

"That in itself is suspicious," a man said. "It's unreal for those two to spend so much time at home. Their counselors at T. C. Williams just laughed when I brought it up."

"So they have to be involved, but indirectly," Detective Rojas said. "They probably set up the robberies."

"They haven't the know-how," the plainclothes woman objected. "There's someone else; someone experienced in running large-scale robberies."

"But their being at the sergeant's in suspicious circumstances is the first time we've been able to tie them to a crime, and now we can put some teeth into questioning them."

"Right on!" "Yeah, man." "Good stuff," came from the group, but I felt let down. "How does this connect with Sergeant Castleman's murder? That's why I'm here, you know," I reminded Rojas.

"In good time," he said. "In good time. This is the way police work is done." He was annoyed. Well, so was I.

"Before I leave you to your police work, then, here's some

new information. I found this key in the sergeant's desk," laying it on the table. "I wondered what those boys were looking for and conducted my own search..." and briefed them on what I had found. When I finished, Rojas sent two detectives with the key to check out the storage space.

The plainclothes woman escorted me to the door, saying, "I've a feeling you won't leave this alone. That sergeant's death is too important to you. If you need help, my name's Lydia Malone. Here's my card with office and home numbers."

As I drove home, I reviewed the situation. CAP was okay so far. The police knew nothing about it or the Downtown Girls, and Detective Rojas was really more interested in the robberies than Cassy's murder. If Yvonne and Sherry killed Cassy by accident, I needed to know for sure. I didn't want anything to blindside CAP later, so, no, I couldn't leave it alone. I'd sort out right and wrong when I knew.

By then I was unlocking my front door and decided to think out what to do next during supper. All I came up with was a visit to Gunny Moore. He probably couldn't help, but I wanted to meet him anyway. I like old salts like him. My father is one.

It was dark when I finally found his office in a cruddy warehouse in a back alley at the northern edge of Alexandria, between old U.S. 1 and the railroad tracks. I'd expected better, but I guessed a trucking company didn't need a trendy office. The only light was a dim one coming through the dirty glass of the warehouse door, so I headed for it. I was fairly close when someone—Hurley Anderson—opened it.

"You do a number on us, Gunny, it'll be your balls in a sling. What's between you and Cassy don't cut any ice with us. We just want our money."

Gunny laughed, a hearty, rolling guffaw. "Shove off, boy. You're outranked. All you need to remember is which side your bread's buttered on. Just keep doing what we tell you. What I tell you, I mean, now Cassy's gone."

"We want our money this Saturday. We're taking off," came Lazar White's voice.

"Now you listen to me, boy, and listen good." Gunny's voice became angry and menacing. "Cassy put that money and that key somewheres. He was going off his rocker, what with all his disappointments eating away at him. He had to be nuts to doublecross me. Me! The only guy in the Corps he could count on. And I trusted *him*. I

cut him in every place I was assigned—Nam, Guam, Okinawa—me where all the goods was and him at home port to sell it. I cut him in here, too, and he screwed me. When I found he never deposited the money like he was s'posed to, and no trace of the last three loads . . . well, 'nuff said." His anger had run out; his voice was quiet now. "Don't worry. I'll find it all. You two still got a job to do, so don't hang around here."

They laughed. "We got that job taped. Those dummies think we're doing 'em a favor, letting 'em do all the work." They slammed the door and horsed their way around the warehouse. I was still standing in the dark, listening to them revving an engine, when the boys' headlights, swinging around the building, picked up a figure running for cover. The driver slammed on the brakes, and both boys jumped out and took off after it. At the same time Gunny opened his door and stood framed in the light.

"Who's there?" he called.

"It's me, a friend of Cassy's," I answered. I didn't want to be caught hiding in the dark. "I just came to talk to you," trying to make my voice sorrowful.

"Well, come on in," he said, the genial old sergeant again.

"Any friend of Cassy's is a friend of mine."

"What's with the people in that pickup?"

"Just some crazy kids," he said, peering to see beyond the light. "Come on in," he said again and ushered me into the dirtiest place I'd ever seen. Engine parts, tools, dirty clothes, greasy rags, and junk were scattered all over. Seeing the expression on my face, he said, "I spent most of my time in the Corps policing up or making sure others did. I don't hafta now, so I just relax. I thought I knew all Cassy's people, but I don't recall you. What's your connection?"

"I'm civil service at headquarters."

"Must have been a terrible shock. His death, I mean. Here, siddown." He shoved ratty magazines, empty food cartons, a couple of wrenches, and some other stuff off the ripped plastic upholstery of a rickety dinette chair.

I was trying to think how to start, when the door was yanked open and a hand propelled the general inside. I thought for a horrible moment she was going to fall flat on her face on the dirty floor. She stumbled, but by some miracle of balance and willpower, stayed upright.

"It's that ditzzy woman from the apartment," Anderson was saying as he followed her in, but stopped abruptly when he saw me. White crashed into him, almost knocking him down.

"That's the other one!" Anderson exclaimed. "What're they hanging 'round for?"

"I got 'er," White said with satisfaction, clenching and unclenching his fists, jittering on his toes. The general's face and hands were bruised, and she looked as though she'd rolled in oily dirt. "She slipped and kept rolling around so's I couldn't get a good hold, otherwise I'd've gotten some blood." White teetered on braced legs, flexing his shoulders. "You stupid old bitch," he told the general. "Think a couple feeble karate moves could deck me?"

I got up to give her my chair, but she straightened her back and didn't move. "Maybe you better sit down, ma' . . . miss." Old habits die hard. Gunny had to shift from "ma'am" to "miss" in midword.

"What we gonna do with 'em?" Anderson asked, dancing around, shadowboxing. Both were all pumped up. "I'm ready for some fun. Laze and me'll take the young one; she's kinda cute. You can have the beatup oldie, Gunny. More your style." He and White laughed.

"Never mind that right now," Gunny said. "I'll figure something out. You two still have those jobs to close out tonight. We don't want anyone getting suspicious, so don't break up the routine."

"Oh, right."

"Yeah, man, that's right."

With a couple of leers in my direction, they charged out, slamming the door. I could hear them laughing and chattering until they revved the engine of their truck and took off in a splatter of gravel.

While Gunny was getting rid of the boys, the general sat down. She looked pretty battered. In spite of what White said, I could see blood oozing from cuts on her hands and trickling from her hair. "Where's your first aid kit, Gunny?" I asked.

"The colonel's pretty tough, as I recall," Gunny answered. "She'll be okay while you two explain yourselves."

"General," I snapped. "Those cuts could get infected if they're not cleaned."

"Uhhmm," he said to her, raising his bushy, salt and pepper eyebrows. "So you made it? Everyone on Okinawa knew how damned ambitious you were. Too ambitious to act like a normal woman. If you are a normal woman."

"You're a disgrace, Moore," the general rapped out. "You and Castleman. If I could have proved you were behind the thefts, you'd both still be in the brig."

He smiled complacently. "Nothing you could do about it then; nothing you can do about it now, and being a general ain't nothin' to me."

It now all fit together. "You killed Cassy, didn't you?" I asked. "And Anderson and White were searching his apartment for a key—the key to a storage space where he'd hidden electronics equipment you had stolen, right?"

He picked up a wrench and sat rubbing it. "So I say right, so what?"

"So nothing," I lied. "I just wanted to know for sure who killed him."

"Like hell," he laughed. "Think I believe that crap?" Then with a quick change of mood, "Where's the key? That merchandise belongs to me."

"I gave it to the police. Told them what it fit—and where."

"The hell you say!" He leaped up and came at me with the wrench upraised, yelling, "Damn you, interfering bitch!" as he aimed at my head. I side-stepped, but not far enough. The wrench caught me a glancing blow on the shoulder, numbing my whole arm. I piv-

oted to face him and knocked his arm aside as he was raising it again. He dropped the wrench, grabbed me by the shoulders, ran me back into the wall, banging my head against it until something made him drop me. I slid to the floor, dizzy and disoriented, seeing through a haze. He and the general were just shapes, moving together.

I heard him laugh and say, "Want to mix it up, colonel m'love? Com'on, baby, I wanted to grapple with you for a long time, only you're gonna get a little extra punishment for shipping me out of Okinawa. I could've made lots more money before normal rotation."

While he was talking, they tangled somehow. I heard grunts and thuds, but I couldn't tell much. My head was fuzzy, but when I could see better, I looked around for a weapon. All I saw was the wrench he'd dropped. I was crawling toward it when the general warned "Top!" in time for me to roll out of the way of a kick from his heavy boots. I managed to get to my knees before he could get close. When he kicked again, I grabbed his foot and twisted it. He landed with a satisfying thump. The general knelt on his back, pinning him down, twisting his arm up behind

him, pushing his face against the floor.

"Hey!" His voice was muffled. "Get the hell off!"

"What was that about mixing it up with the colonel, you maggot? Pull, you bastard, pull hard so I can break your arm. After all the trouble you gave me on Okinawa, I'd love it."

While she was letting off steam, she yanked the belt from her slacks, grabbed his other arm, and lashed them together above the elbow. I pulled my belt off, sat on his kicking legs, and looped it around his ankles. The general got off his back, and I tied the ends of the two belts together, arching his back enough to be uncomfortable.

If I could have found some duct tape, I'd have taped his mouth. He swore up a storm, threatening horrible revenge. "Shut up," I told him, "or I'll use this wrench on you like you did on Cassy."

"You'll never prove it," he snarled. While he continued to curse and threaten, I dug out Lydia Malone's card and dialed her number. When I finished briefing her about why and where I was holding Moore, she told me to stay until she and Rojas got here.

"Ma'am," I said to the general, who was dabbing at her bruises and looking like the cat

that swallowed the canary. "The police ETA is about fifteen minutes."

"Right," she said, looking at Moore, who was trying to roll around. "So the Girls really didn't do it."

"Hey, let's make a deal," Moore called. "We're all Marines here. No point in letting civilians in on this."

"Semper Fi," the general said and marched out. The military band in my head was back on duty, but some of the musicians were playing sour notes. Damn and blast! Shared intelligence and planning could have produced a coordinated operation—with the same result. She got her satisfaction taking Moore down, but we both could have been badly hurt, if not killed.

I brooded on the problem of working in the dark while Moore alternately begged to be untied and threatened to "blow that bitch out of the water." By the time a squad of police arrived, sirens blaring, lights flashing, guns in hand, I was feeling pretty good about what Detective Rojas called my "collar."

"This the turkey you want roasted?" Rojas asked when he saw Moore. "Trussed him up all by your hundred and twenty pound self, did you?"

"Combat readiness," I told him. "Part of every Marine's equipment."

"Which includes wearing two belts in case you need to tie someone up?"

Before I could think of an answer to that, one of the uniformed cops said, "We better untie him. We don't want him yelling police brutality."

While they cuffed Moore and read him his rights, Lydia and I left for the police station where I spent the next several hours filling out forms, answering questions, and signing statements. No one asked me again about the two belts. Patrol officers picked up the two boys, leaving two sets of parents in shock. It was dawn when, after a shower to wash off the crud from Moore's dirty floor, I fell into bed.

The general called in sick and didn't report for duty for almost a week. I wondered how badly she was hurt. I ached some, but X-rays showed no bone damage where Moore had hit me with the wrench. The media reported the murder as a falling out among thieves and moved on to juicier things.

When the general returned to duty, all I saw was a bruise on her right cheekbone. She kept her hands out of sight, but of course, business as usual. I had put entry forms for two

new Alerts in her in box. One checked out; the other was revenge for being dumped. Not easy to take, but it wasn't sexual harassment. She put the fifth version of the CAP report in her out box, mercifully marked for distribution.

"Top," she said as I started to leave. "A debriefing is in order."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, turning back to find her with a braced-for-action set to her shoulders.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine, ma'am," I answered, hiding my astonishment at this first-ever inquiry. "Nothing serious. How about you?" I ventured.

She displayed her bandaged hands, then pointed to her head with a slight smile. "Several stitches up there, some aches and pains." She took a deep breath and looked at me with such intense determination that the color of her eyes seemed brighter. "I showed weakness."

"No, ma'am, not that I saw," I said emphatically.

"It was about the Downtown Girls. They blackmailed me, said they'd reveal their connection to CAP, and I caved in. You didn't believe me when I told you they were innocent."

"Yes, ma'am—er, no, ma'am. I wondered what proof you had."

"Just my fear. I had too much to lose. Top, we're going to have to figure out some way to keep the pressure on the men off duty without using the Girls."

"The Alert that's a go . . ." pointing to her in box " . . . is in the barracks. A man harassing a woman who lives down the hall. Plenty of volunteers to continue the cure after duty hours without using the Girls'—er—specialty."

"Right," she said. "In the meantime, we'll put together an ad hoc committee of experienced volunteers and do some brainstorming. Meanwhile, let's get this cure under way."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. Asking about my health? Saying *we* and *let's*? Will wonders never cease? As I marched out, the band struck up.

King José's Hobby

by Linda Paul

Long, long ago and far away
There lived a king called King José.
The people dwelling in his land
All thought that King José was grand.
His hair was dark, and it was curly.
His teeth were always white and pearly.
He was handsome; he was tall.
Some said he had no flaws at all.

His subjects loved the way he dressed.
His uniforms were neatly pressed.
He'd different hats for different rooms.
The hats were tall with tall red plumes.
He wore big boots with shiny toes
That looked sharp next his fancy clothes.
With ninety medals he'd been blessed;
He wore them all upon his chest.

However, perfect though he seemed,
His subjects never ever dreamed
The king they looked upon with awe
Would soon develop one small flaw.

King José, in search of a hobby,
Saw an ad in the palace lobby:
"We teach cooking . . . cordon bleu . . .
Call 1-800-COOK WITH LOU!"

So King José picked up the phone,
Arranged for lessons in his home.
Chef Louis taught the king to broil,
To bake, to baste, to stew, to boil.
But after lesson number one
The king declared the lessons done.

He felt he knew 'most everything.
And who would argue with a king?

On Friday night he cooked a meal:
Oyster stew and breaded veal.
He served it to his brother Fred.
The next day young Prince Fred was dead.
The doctor said Fred died of flu.
The king was sad; his subjects, too.
The funeral was big and grand.
With kings and queens from many lands.

And King José prepared a feast
Of oyster stew and wildebeest.
A dozen kings, a dozen queens
Ate the meal with garlic beans.
And in the morning they were found
All lying dead upon the ground.
The doctor said they'd died of flu.
The king was sad; his subjects, too.

There was a funeral for the "dozens,"
Attended by some royal cousins.
King José, the gracious host,
Did what he liked to do the most:
Prepared a feast of oyster stew,
With lobster, crab, and shark meat, too.
The next day what a tragic sight!—
A hundred cousins died that night.

An epidemic was declared.
King José's subjects all were scared.
The king advised his sister Alice
To move the subjects to his palace.
So every subject came to stay,
To sleep, to eat, to read and play.
King José had his men go round,
Spray disinfectant on the ground.

His subjects soon lost all their fear.
They felt secure with José near.

The king himself was feeling better
And sat him down to write a letter. . . .

" . . . So, Auntie dear, the flu's been beat.
My subjects need a little treat.
Tonight we'll have a barbecue.
I think I'll make my oyster stew."

Lady of the Snow

by Martin Limón

Huang raised his head and watched the king's constable trudge through the thick layer of snow that enshrouded the ancient city of Seoul. When the officer had passed, he rose from the ground and shook his slim body. Frozen flakes erupted from his tunic, leaving him glowing in the moonlight like some great muscular god, wrapped in garments of pure white.

He breathed deeply, taking the time to warm himself and bask in the enormity of his skill.

Huang had lain immobile, half buried in a drift of snow, as the constable patrolled the narrow lanes between the tightly packed residences. The officer, always alert for evildoers who would prey on the rich, had stepped within a hairsbreadth of his supine body.

Somber gray walls of stone masonry loomed all about, interspersed by the thickly lumbered gates that protected the inner courtyards of the most powerful families of this ancient capital city. Wives and children, servants and concubines slept soundly behind these walls, all overcome with slumber during the deepest Hour of the Rat. Asleep and resting peacefully. Except for Huang. He prowled the city. The invisible stalker. King of the snow.

He plugged his hand into the drifted snow and pulled up two tightly bound poles of bamboo. He jerked them apart and felt the sharp snap of the crossbars locking into place. Before he set the ladder up, he checked the address at the gate once again. Buk-chang-dong, 38 ho, 15 bon-ji. An elegant Chinese character had been engraved into the burnished plaque beside the door: Yun. Emissary of the King and a man of vast land holdings. And his merchant enterprises crawled out from this little kingdom of Korea like the tentacles of some great, greedy octopus.

A man of great wealth, Huang thought, and many concubines. One by one, the muscles of his sinewy body rippled a little dance of nervous anticipation. Time for work.

First, his calloused palms brushed away all tracks he had made in the freshly fallen snow. Then he propped the bamboo ladder against the tile roof that topped the stone wall surrounding the

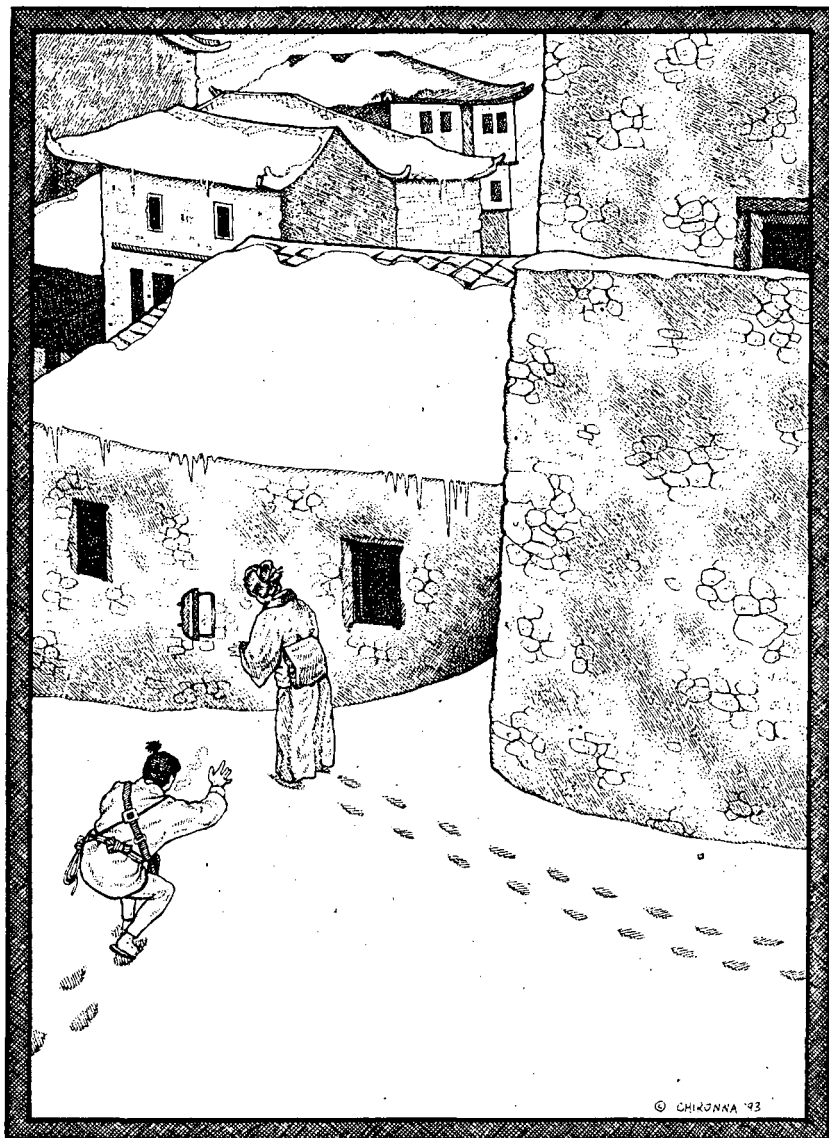
Yun compound. At the top of the wall he squatted on the tiles, pulled the ladder up after him, and tossed it silently into the courtyard. He scooped handfuls of snow off the tiles and tossed them into the street, covering the holes that the ladder had made in the snow. Once inside the compound, he crouched beside the ladder and listened. All seemed quiet.

Most homes of the wealthy are laid out in a similar manner. In the front, a large building containing the *sarang bang*, the hall for greeting and entertaining guests. Near that, the master's study and sleeping chambers. Behind the front building, a courtyard with a small but well-tended garden in the center. Arrayed around the courtyard were the quarters for the first wife and her children and behind that rooms for all the subsequent wives. Finally, the rooms for the concubines. The servant quarters were set off by themselves, out back, near the tool shed and the privy.

Huang crept through the courtyard until he found the building that housed Emissary Yun's concubines. He had no doubt that this was the right building. Master Koh's intelligence was always accurate. As he crept through the darkness, he paused every few steps to turn and erase his footsteps by spreading the loose snow with his big rough hands. On the side of the building for the concubines he found the opening to the heating flues.

He wandered around the compound for a few minutes, covering his tracks all the way, until he found a pair of metal tongs and a large flat pan. He brought them back, opened the heating flue, reached in with the metal tongs, and pulled out one of the large cylindrical charcoal briquettes. The briquette flared when it hit the cold air. Huang set it carefully in the metal pan, reached in and got the other briquette, and set it atop its brother. He left the flue open, found a dark spot, and waited.

Without warm air circulating beneath the floor of the concubines' quarters it didn't take one of them long to rouse from her slumber. Huang pressed deeper into the shadows when he heard a wooden door slide open. A young woman bundled in sleeping robes stepped out onto the small wooden porch that ran along the front of the building. Carefully, she closed the door behind her so as not to awaken her sisters. She stepped off the porch, slid into a pair of slippers, and tiptoed around to the side of the building. She stood in open-mouthed amazement when she saw that the heating flue had been left open. Before she could turn, Huang was on her.



BEFORE SHE COULD TURN, HUANG WAS ON HER.

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His big hand covered her mouth and half of her face. She struggled, but with his other arm he held her firmly and lifted her off her feet. When he got her back into the shadows near the big stone wall, he laid his body atop her until she stopped struggling. With a flick of his forearm, he showed her the knife. He pressed the tip against her throat.

"If you make a sound," he said, "I will slice you like the unclean butcher slices his hogs."

Wide-eyed, the girl nodded her understanding.

Deftly Huang pulled a few short pieces of hemp rope from beneath his robes and tied the girl and gagged her. When she was secure, he went back to the heating flue, replaced the charcoal, and closed the lid. Carefully, he erased all footsteps, including those of the young concubine. Back at the wall he set up the ladder, flopped the girl over his shoulder, and climbed to the top of the wall. He knew that by now the constable would be back at his small guardpost, warming his feet at the metal stove, snoozing or exchanging boasts with his fellow patrolmen. The next patrol wouldn't filter through the city until just before dawn. A last check to make sure that nothing was amiss that would cause the wealthy to complain and bring down elitist wrath upon the constabulary superiors. Nevertheless, Huang checked the alleyway carefully. No one was coming. He hoisted the girl up and dropped her over the wall onto a pillow of drifted snow. He swung the ladder up, covered its marks with tossed snow as he had done before, and dropped lightly to the road beside the wriggling girl. He carried her around the corner, stashed her in the darkness beneath a wooden portico, and came back and covered his tracks once again.

He hefted her over his shoulder, and once he got her weight balanced right, he strode away with the confident air of a man carrying home a sack of rice. Now he was leaving only the tracks of a man walking along, tracks that would be noticed by no one. The still night enveloped them, and he knew that the young concubine wouldn't be missed until morning.

By then, he would be done with her.

The sun glimmered like a rising coal behind the cloud banks far to the east. The concubine's legs wobbled as she tottered towards the huge gate of the Yun compound. She felt unclean, his filth and odor upon her. What she wanted was a bath, long and hot in the public bathhouse, and then clean clothes

and a freshly laundered mat to sleep on. When she reached the gate to the compound, she fell against it, and hammered with her small fist.

"*Salam salyo!* Help me!"

It took a few minutes for the members of the Yun household to rouse themselves and get to the door to open it for her. When they did, they helped the young concubine hobble in and laid her down on her still rumpled sleeping mat. They listened in gawking astonishment to her strange story.

Master Koh placed his hands flat on the floor and bent over from his sitting position until his forehead was slightly lower than his elbows. He was a skinny man, nothing but bone and scraggly chin whiskers. He wore the simple tunic and trousers of the traveling merchant. A cylindrical hat of woven horsehair was tied atop his head by a string that was knotted beneath his narrow chin. Emissary Yun spoke first.

"Welcome, Master Koh, to my humble household. But I'm afraid that we have little here that would interest a man of commerce like yourself."

Master Koh raised his eyes and pondered the august figure of Emissary Yun. He sat crosslegged on the floor behind a low writing table, scrolls and tablets scattered everywhere. A narrow brush was still wet after being used to scribble pages of Korean script interspersed with intricate Chinese characters. His robes were of richly embroidered burgundy silk.

Master Koh hid his contempt for the *yangban*—this charter member of the ruling scholar classes. Emissary Yun had traveled far and learned much, but he was still sensitive to the whispered gossip that swept through the walled city of Seoul like stormclouds before a typhoon. It was this fear of scandal that made him vulnerable.

Master Koh tried to modulate his scratchy voice. It didn't work. "You mistake my intentions, Emissary Yun," he said. "I am not here for mere commerce, I come here as someone who wishes to help a friend in his time of need."

Emissary Yun raised one eyebrow. "And what is this 'time of need' you refer to?"

"It is a very delicate subject, and if I did not think I could help, I would not be the one bringing this up. But surely you have heard the words that have been spreading behind the wrists of the gentle-

men and ladies of this great city. The message, although muffled, has been quite clear. Like the call of the king's crier."

The muscles of Emissary Yun's smooth face tensed for a moment and then, through an act of will, composed themselves. "You refer, of course, to the unfortunate mishap that befell our young concubine, Lady Shin."

"Yes. Very unfortunate and certainly she is a lady of great virtue but . . ."

"But what, Master Koh? Do the people of the city accuse her of wrongdoing?"

"Certainly I don't, your excellency, but there are those in this city, people of small mind, who do. And it is true that the facts of the case do lend some credence to their vindictive mouthings. The fact that she was out alone at night, of her own volition . . ."

"She was dragged off by an intruder."

"Yes. Of course. I believe that. But the rabble in this city do not. You know how the uneducated look at only the appearances of the matter. The fact that there were no tracks in the freshly fallen snow or that there was no evidence of break-in, or that none of the other ladies in the sleeping chambers were aroused, or that . . ."

"Enough!"

Emissary Yun reached for his writing brush, let it drip for a moment over the inkwell, and then wrote, on a fresh sheet of paper, the Chinese characters for *suk nyo*—a woman of feminine virtue. When finished he gazed at the ideographs that composed the character: gracefully flowing water, the tight-waisted figure of a woman. Had his little concubine betrayed him? The truth of the case didn't matter. What mattered was that everyone in this gossip-flooded capital believed that she had. He couldn't afford to be seen in court as a fool, befuddled by the wiles of an uneducated woman.

Yun muttered as he sketched the characters again, less elegantly this time. "Perhaps a suitable home for the young woman . . ."

Master Koh sucked breath between his twisted teeth: "It is possible, sir, that this could be arranged. Of course, a suitable home for a woman of such a high position will be difficult to find, but perhaps . . ."

Emissary Yun stopped his scribbling and looked up. "It wouldn't be here in Seoul, would it?"

"No. Of course not. Not anywhere near here. In fact, the young woman would never return to Seoul again. Of that I can assure you."

Emissary Yun looked back at his writing table. "Take her, then." Master Koh bowed his head. "There is, of course, the matter of my time and effort in searching for a suitable arrangement."

"What's your fee?"

"Three taels of silver would be sufficient."

"Three taels?"

"Introductions must be made, travel arranged . . ."

"Very well, then." Emissary Yun waved his hand. "Get her out of here today."

Master Koh bowed and backed politely from the room, struggling to keep the satisfaction from showing on his face.

The muscular Young Huang had already tossed down twelve cups at Master Koh's table, and his face was suffused with blood.

"Another delivery two days from now," he said. "With any luck, four women this time. That old hairy pirate will have to pay dearly for this lot, after all the work I put into them."

Master Koh reached for another prawn with his chopsticks and dropped it into his half-empty rice bowl.

"Work? You call your meager contribution to this enterprise 'work'?" Master Koh's thin lips sucked carefully on a cup of luke-warm barley tea, the only fluid his ulcerated innards would accept. He looked up at Young Huang. "You have fun with the beautiful ladies at night, and still you eat and drink me into the poverty of a rice farmer during the day."

"As you say, it is true," Huang said, "but if it weren't for me, these women would never be defiled and you wouldn't be able to pick up such a precious commodity at such a cheap price."

"You boast too much. Anyone could do your job. Bargaining with the rich, however, that is a skill that has taken years to perfect, even for one of such cunning as my humble self."

Young Huang downed another cup of the fiery rice wine. A serving girl, her hair tied back in black braids, entered the room and dropped another plate of raw squid in hot sauce onto the middle of the table. Huang leered and patted her on the rear.

"Later, little one, for you. Tonight I have more work to do."

The girl's face remained impassive. She picked up the empty bowls and left the room.

"One more acquisition," Master Koh said. "And then we rendezvous with the hairy pirate at Rock Island and receive the money that I have worked so hard to earn."

"And I've worked hard, too," Huang said.

Master Koh twisted his scraggly beard with gnarled fingers and stared at the Young Huang. A fool, he thought, but useful. At least for now.

When the wine was gone, Master Koh checked the back room. The three former concubines he had acquired in the last few weeks sat sullen and morose, awaiting their fate like sheep before the slaughter.

The great house of Merchant Cho was the greatest in the entire district of Sinnei-dong. The women of the household bustled about in preparation for the midwinter festival that would soon be upon them. They broke encrusted ice off of earthen pots that had lain frozen in the snow since autumn. The fermented cabbage and cucumbers therein were chopped and diced into bitesized morsels and displayed in elegant porcelain dishware. Winter robes were embroidered, presents wrapped in rice paper and brightly colored ribbon, and fish and bean curd carefully selected from the nearby open-air market. The gossip that accompanied the work was about one thing: the women who were being sold from the great households of the city for having betrayed their masters.

"Such shameless women," said Mistress Cho, second wife of the master. "In my day they wouldn't have just been sold to lesser households, they would have been dragged out into the street and whipped until they cried for mercy. There is just too much license in today's world. What people need is discipline and a clear understanding of their station in life. It's the only way society can work the way it should."

A series of clucks greeted her words. The only one who kept her mouth shut was the youngest concubine of the household, a woman known now, in her new life, as Lady Oh. She concentrated on her embroidery. That so many young women were being sold off and cast so cruelly from society didn't seem right to her. What had they done, after all, other than follow their own hearts? But she knew better than to speak out. She had learned the value of silence in her childhood. Poverty had been the stern instructor.

In that life she had been known simply as Oki. Her parents were rice farmers, and she remembered the long, slow summers while her mother and her father transplanted the thousands of tender rice shoots, one by one, into the water-filled paddies. She could still

see her mother's tired face and the disappointment that showed when the landlord came to collect most of the rice at the end of the harvest season. What they had left was barely enough for themselves, but they sold it anyway, to get the few pieces of silver with which they could buy cabbage and barley. And for the rest of the year they ate barley gruel, laced with beans when times were good. And she remembered the boys from the wealthy families going off to school and learning to read and write and how she longed to do so but was never allowed. All she learned were the arts of rice farming. But when she got older, something strange happened. People started paying attention to her and started saying that she was beautiful.

Her parents somehow managed to come up with enough money to hire a go-between, and the crass old woman returned to their home one day with the news that she had found a position for Oki in Seoul, as the concubine of a great man. The payment her parents received allowed them to buy a small plot of land for their own and made it possible for them to raise their two young sons on something other than barley gruel. So Oki had gone off willingly, happy to be off the farm, although her mother had cried bitterly. In Seoul, Oki was given fine clothing and cosmetics and instructions on how to act in polite company, and after two weeks she was introduced to her new master. The great and wealthy Merchant Cho spent that night with her. It was her first night with a man, but it wasn't nearly as difficult as she thought it would be. After that, she was known to everyone in the household as Lady Oh.

She took her mind off the talk of the scandals that had been sweeping through Seoul and thought of her mother and her younger brothers. She had devised new ways of raising small amounts of money—from her embroidery, from doing favors for the rich ladies in the neighborhood—so she could send the profits to her mother far away in the farmlands to the south. And she thought of the secret lessons in reading that she and a few of the younger women in town had been taking from an old dowager whose view of life differed from that of the narrow Mistress Cho. She thought of the secret literature. The literature that had been written by women, not only here in Korea, but in China and Japan, and had been passed clandestinely, hand to hand, amongst women for centuries. Her mouth watered when she thought of the delicious stories of love and hatred and jealousy that reflected more accurately the unending hardships of women's lives than any of the classics

read openly by men and boys fortunate enough to be literate. Of course, she kept her ability to read secret. It would shame her master if it became known that one of his concubines had been so brazen as to learn to read and write.

After the evening meal, eaten in the women's chambers, Lady Oh excused herself and went to her sleeping quarters where she read until the giggling and the horseplay of the other concubines died down. She rolled out her sleeping mat, doused the oil lamp, and lay down to sleep on the warm floor.

The cold stiffened her body. Suddenly she was awake. Darkness enveloped the world, and there was no sound except the soft breathing of her sisters.

That worthless maid, Lady Oh thought. She failed to get up and change the charcoal. No sense in going to all the trouble of finding her in the servants' quarters to wake her up. Easier to change the charcoal herself. After all, she had done it many times on the farm—when there was money for charcoal.

She rose quietly, put on a heavy robe, and tiptoed down the hall. At the door she slid back the paneling, and a world of cold rushed in to slap her face. Ignoring the discomfort, Lady Oh stepped out onto the narrow wooden porch and squatted down to find her slippers. Her body became a frigid inflammation of pimpled flesh. She closed the door behind her and trotted around the side of the building. The cover to the charcoal flue was open, and the still flaming briquettes sat in a metal pan off to the side. Odd, Lady Oh thought. It was as if the maid had stopped right in the middle of changing the charcoal.

She heard it first. Behind her. A hand swirled around her head, clamped itself to her mouth, and before she could scream, she was being smothered and felt hot breath on the back of her neck. She struggled, threw elbows, twisted her body, kicked. But now she was in the air, being carried away, and she felt a large, strong body against her back. Soon she was face down in the snow, tied up and gagged, and the man left her for a few moments. She screamed into the rope and dirty rags stuffed into her mouth, but no sounds came out. When the man came back, he tossed her over his shoulders like a sack of rice, carried her over the fence, and dropped her onto a snowdrift below. Lady Oh rolled and struggled but couldn't free herself from the bonds. What kind of nightmare was this? Why had she ever come to this strange, brutal city? Why

couldn't they just leave her alone and let her stay with her mother and her father and her younger brothers?

The man carried her away through the maze of alleys that was the city of Seoul until he found a dark place. He kept her hands tied painfully behind her back but managed to loosen some of her robes. While Lady Oh tried to think of honeyed spring mornings when her mother would call to her and clap her hands and laugh, he had his way with her.

Afterwards, she once again felt his hot breath on her neck.

Lady Oh looked at the great outer gate of the household of Merchant Cho. Everything was quiet within. The first rays of sunlight crept through the narrow alleys, casting weird shadows on the unblemished snow. She thought of running up to the door, pounding on it, calling for help. She thought of being escorted to her room, of a physician's being called, of the incessant questioning of Mistress Cho, and that's when suddenly, like the rays of morning sun seeping into the dark alleys, she realized what had happened.

She understood now why the intruder had been so careful to cover his tracks and why there had been a rash of infidelity and scandal in the capital and why so many women had been sold to be taken away to far-off lands to have their shame hidden from the eyes of polite society. And she realized what would happen if she pounded on the unyielding wooden gate of Master Cho's household. How the stories of her reading late at night and her meeting with the dowager and her shameless attempts to earn extra money through her embroidery, how it would all come out. And how no one would believe that such a woman had been the innocent victim of a complex plot.

But after the realization, it wasn't despair that filled her slim body but a curious feeling of freedom and a resolve that snapped like a metal trap.

Lady Oh swiveled and walked the few hundred yards to the spot where she had been so recently defiled. She found the big man's footprints in the soft snow. As she followed them she encountered only a few early-risen merchants and the collectors of trash. They stared at her with wide eyes, but she ignored them, and finally the tracks stopped at a hovel made of rotted wood. A rickety sign swung on rusted hinges above the door.

Wine Shop of the Virtuous Lady.

*

The young girl in the wine shop raised her chubby hand to cover her childlike laugh. She was flattered to receive so much attention from such a beautiful and elegant woman. It was still late morning, and the men who frequented this shop would not be done with their labors for many hours. She had time to talk. When the conversation veered to the man who owned this place and his young but very rude assistant, the girl was not at all hesitant to talk about them.

"Their names are Master Koh and the Young Huang," she said. "They have plans to find suitable positions for the three former concubines who live upstairs and will leave tomorrow on Master Koh's boat."

Lady Oh sipped on her red tea. "Where will they go?"

"Someplace. I'm not sure. They said it is called Rock Island. It must be a very exciting place."

"Why is that?"

"Because they will be meeting a man there. A hairy pirate, they called him."

"A hairy pirate."

"Yes."

"Did they say when they would be leaving?"

"Tomorrow. Early. Before the rising of the river."

Lady Oh held the girl's chubby hand briefly, thanked her, and told her that she thought she was very intelligent and very beautiful. The young wine server's cheeks filled with blood until they were crimson.

Lady Oh's preparations had to be made quickly because soon the word of her disappearance would spread throughout the capital. First, she stopped at a noodle shop near Master Cho's residence and ate a hearty meal. The cook put it on her master's bill. Then she went to a ladies' clothier and bought some garments more suitable for outdoor wear and a good sturdy pair of shoes.

"Not very fashionable," the proprietress said.

"No."

"Are you visiting the countryside, Lady Oh?"

"How perceptive you are. Be sure to charge my master for these purchases. Oh yes, this clothing I will not be needing any longer."

The proprietress held the richly embroidered bundle of scented silk in her arms and stared after Lady Oh as she strode out into the bustling roadway.

*

The next stop was a jewelry store. Lady Oh hesitated to spend so much money on her master's account, but there was no other way. The owner was delighted with the elegant brooch and necklace she purchased. Both were made of hammered gold, inlaid with jade.

Lady Oh had never been one to place too great a value on possessions, and it caused her no pain at all when she went to the pawnbroker a few doors away and immediately sold the jewelry. With the money she received there, she made her last purchase right away. She knew that soon the merchants of the city would be buzzing with news of her strange behavior.

The blacksmith was almost tongue-tied at having such a beautiful woman in his shop. He was much too befuddled to get top dollar for what she purchased, and as she strolled away he wondered what in the world such a fine young lady would ever do with an axe.

The fisherman pulled at the net slowly, examining it carefully for tears or signs of wear.

"Rock Island?" he said. "It is very far away, and why would such a beautiful lady want to go there?"

"My reasons are my own," Lady Oh said. She noticed that many of the fishermen along the quay of the River Han had stopped their work to stare at her. She ignored them and absently touched the small axe lying flat against her belly beneath the tunic. "How much will you charge me?"

The fisherman rubbed stubby fingers across a sunbaked jaw. "I will lose two days of fishing."

Lady Oh handed him some coins. "Will this be enough?"

He looked at the burnished metal in his rough palm.

"Yes," he said. "This will be enough."

"Then we leave tomorrow. Early. Before the rising of the river."

The fisherman nodded dumbly, stared again at the coins, and watched the fine lady walk back towards the city.

The wind told him first. Something was wrong.

Orak again sucked the cold salt air through his broad nostrils.

In the distance he spied Rock Island and the outline of Master Koh's boat on the rocky shore. As his ship bobbed closer, he saw the sharp, splintered wood stuck out along the side of Mas-

ter Koh's boat as if it had been severely damaged.

He looked at his two sons proudly, standing on either side of the craft, probing with poles in the choppy waters to keep the boat from ramming into the treacherous rocks that surrounded this godforsaken piece of rock.

When they hit the beach, Orak's two sons jumped off the boat and pulled it up onto the sand. Orak hopped ashore and strode directly to Master Koh's boat. It was as he feared. A gaping hole in the side, but it didn't look like the work of a rock. It seemed that this damage had been done purposely. Maybe with an axe.

"Hail, Orak!"

It was Master Koh hobbling down the rockstrewn hill towards the beach. Behind him strode his burly assistant, the Young Huang. When they got near, Koh looked winded but relieved.

"We are glad you've come, Sailor Orak. As you can see, someone has damaged our boat and left us stranded here."

"Who would do such a thing?"

"I don't know. We arrived here yesterday afternoon and took shelter for the evening in the cave up the side of this hill." Master Koh gestured with his bony arm.

"Is the cargo there?"

"Yes. They are there now. Warm and safe."

"And untouched?" he asked.

"Yes. Of course, untouched." Koh rubbed his bony fingers together. The Young Huang shuffled his feet. Koh turned his attention towards the boat. "This morning when my apprentice here came to check on our boat he discovered the damage."

"Have you seen anyone hereabouts?"

"No one. It's been as quiet as a grave."

The three men looked about and listened to the sea winds whistling through the jagged peaks that surrounded the rocky cove. No one lives here, Orak thought. No human, anyway. This island is fit only for migrating birds and men who want to conduct business far away from prying eyes.

"You must take us back to Korea when you leave, Sailor Orak." Master Koh rubbed his skinny hands and bowed slightly as he spoke.

"You know I can't do that," Orak said. "If the magistrates of your Korean king found me doing business in their waters, my sons and I would be beheaded on the spot." He waved his thick

forearm towards the cliffs above. "Especially if they discover the type of cargo I am carrying."

"Then you must take us back to your country. From Japan we can find passage back to our own land."

"My country is not Japan. We are the people known as the Ainu, the original inhabitants of those islands you call Japan. I only do business with the Japanese and sell this cargo to the rich men in their great cities."

Orak thought of the stories of war told around the campfires of his youth. Of how his ancestors had fought the Japanese shogun's and been gradually pushed ever farther north until now they owned only the coldest, most inhospitable lands of the frozen north and the Japanese held the good farmland in the south. They also forced the Ainu to stay away from the rich coastal fishing waters. As head of a large clan, Orak had no choice but to seek commerce elsewhere, far away from his native shores. Between the shoguns of Japan, the king of Korea, and the great Emperor on the Dragon Throne of China, there was no place on this hard earth for the Ainu. It was his great-grandfather who had first made contact with the Korean purveyors of female flesh and discovered that the wealthy men of Japan had an insatiable appetite for the young Korean morsels. His family had been the middlemen in this trade ever since. Orak sighed at how far they'd fallen from the nobility of the Cult of the Great Bear.

"But you can't leave us here," Koh said. "We will starve. And no other ships will come by here for months."

"Don't fear, old man, we won't leave you." Orak looked towards the horizon. The shadows of stormclouds peeked over the horizon. "Come. It gets late. Let us look at the cargo."

Orak gave instructions to his oldest son to spend the night by their boat. The young man nodded obediently, and the rest of the company trudged up the hill.

A small fire burned fitfully in the cave. Three young women sat huddled near it, not in the fine raiments they had once worn when they were prized concubines, but in the cast-off rags Master Koh had scrounged for them. Orak put out his calloused hand and, one by one, tilted each girl's chin up so he could look at her. So young, he thought. Each one reminded him of his daughters back in the village of his clan. Silently he prayed to the Great Bear for forgiveness of his sins.

Koh ordered the young women to prepare the last of their provisions, and after they had eaten, everyone lay down to sleep.

When the hail and the thunder and the lightning came, the small company of travelers awoke and watched the eerie shapes outside the mouth of the cave. The girls huddled together and whimpered. Orak watched for a while, grunted, and went back to sleep.

An hour later, when his son crawled into the cave, Orak did not berate him. Without shelter in this weather a man would freeze to death or, at the very least, lose a hand or a foot to frostbite.

Besides, he knew that no one lived on this island, and as long as Master Koh and the Young Huang were here, he felt certain that no harm would come to his boat. And what would they gain by such a foolish thing? They would be stranded here, too, only to face a slow starvation. The damage to the boat must have been the result of some foolish vendetta between the two scoundrels. His sons slept lightly on either side of the cave, their arms at the ready beneath their bodies. Orak threw one more log on the fire and went to sleep.

In the morning the small band of travelers clambered down the hillside towards the boat. When he saw it, Orak's heart sank. The damage was much greater this time. Someone had hammered straight through the hull. Wood chips and splintered lumber were everywhere. Even if they were back in their home port, the boat would be beyond repair. Here, without tools, repair was impossible, and only the sturdiest boats could survive in these rough winter waters.

The women cried and hugged one another. Master Koh wailed and pounded on his skinny skull. The Young Huang sniveled and seemed about to begin whimpering. Only Orak's sons stood impassively, like stone soldiers.

Orak looked for tracks. There were none on the gravelly surface. He walked down the beach, checking for signs. About twenty yards farther on he saw her.

She sat crosslegged in front of a naturally hewn block of granite. Beautiful. Like a queen on her throne. Her long black hair fell straight to her shoulders, and she wore a plain but well-tailored pair of trousers and a tunic. Cradled in her elbow, blade pointed up, was an axe, the tool that had sealed their fate. Her face was a perfectly shaped oval and reminded Orak of the painted porcelain dolls he had seen in the great cities of China. The only difference

was that the face of this doll was blue. Icicles dripped from her nose and ears.

When they saw that Orak had stopped on the beach, the others ran up behind him. The girls gasped, Master Koh stood dumbfounded, the Young Huang gave out a strangled choking in his throat. Master Koh swiveled on him.

"Is this she? The one who didn't return to the household of her master?"

Young Huang swallowed again. All eyes were on him.

"Yes," he said. "This is she."

Koh slapped him. "Idiot! You should have followed her, but you were so besotted with your own pleasure."

Huang hung his head. Koh turned back to Orak. "But why would she do this? In destroying these boats, she not only kills us but seals her own fate as well."

Orak looked back at the frozen beauty almost fondly. He thought of the former greatness of his people, of the ancient tales of heroic exploits, and he thought of how his sons would be spared the shame of living with the slave trade. What kind of woman was this? To come all the way to the center of the cold ocean to seek her revenge? He turned that over in his mind and decided.

"She did the final thing," he said, "that all great people know how to do when there is no more hope of honor." He looked at his sons and out to the rolling sea. "The thing that I should have known how to do long ago."

"What's that?"

"She seized the final freedom. She chose her own way of dying. And she died well, this lady of the snow."

Illusions

by James McKimmey

“**L**isten!” said Nikki Bobbitt, looking up with little green eyes at the television set mounted above the breakfast bar where she and Henry Bobbitt were consuming coffee and toasted English muffins.

“Now what?” Tall, fat, and cherub-faced, Henry Bobbitt asked his wife the question with a faint note of irritation. Playing the TV when they ate their Sunday morning breakfast annoyed him. But Nikki invariably switched on *Head-line News*.

“Susan Granger,” said Nikki, tall, blonde, facially unattractive, energetic, even-tempered, with a caustic tongue and a healthy libido; she was even a good mother when the kids were home from private schools. “The woman was stabbed to death with a letter opener in a motel in Pasadena, they think about an hour ago because she was seen alive just before that. A maid found her dead.”

“Chip’s fourth wife,” Bobbitt said with disdain.

“Third! See? The news person just said it.”

“Third is what I said!” Bobbitt, suddenly certain that he had, could feel his face heating. It was the mention of Chip Granger’s name, of course. And, too, he hated to have someone, anyone, discover him to be wrong. Consequently Henry Bobbitt believed what he wanted to believe when it was convenient to believe it.

“Don’t be angry again, Henry.” She looked at him with amused accusation, those small green eyes set too close together, her wide full-lipped mouth curling up at the corners. “You hear his name and you get red.”

“Nonsense!” Bobbitt replied loudly. But she was right. Chip Granger had at one time been his best friend right here in this San Francisco Peninsula town where they’d grown up. Now he was the famous Chip Granger, novelist and short story writer. Frequent guest on every talk show on the TV dial. For the past five years host of his own television show, *Chip Granger’s Weird World*. Good old

Chip Granger, a local hero who'd become an international celebrity and who hadn't contacted Bobbitt once since he'd left town. "It figures!" Bobbitt stated. "One of his wives getting murdered! As a matter of fact, Chip probably did it!" He nodded, pleased with his assessment. Ever since the man had kissed this town goodbye and gone on to fame and fortune, Bobbitt had adopted a viewpoint he'd found absolutely necessary to existing in his world: whoever made it big on the entertainment scene had to have done so as the result of being the kind of son of a bitch who was willing to sell his soul.

"Really!" said Nikki Bobbitt, formerly Nikki Fickler, daughter of the president of the Second West Coast Security Bank. She slid off her stool and walked with athletic grace toward the coffeepot. It was October tenth and autumn-warm as usual, this far south on the Peninsula, so that she was wearing a thin red T-shirt and tight white shorts. As always, Bobbitt couldn't help watching the movements of her extraordinarily beautiful body, tanned from a summer beside the pool outside this large rambling house, a severe contrast to her homely face.

With their cups refilled, Nikki reseated herself and said

with a definite taunting tone, "Whysoever would hearing something about Chip Granger make you so angry, lover? So that you'd even accuse him of murder?" Her thick lower lip then pursed outward so it appeared to have been stung by a bee. "Is it because of that time ever so long ago when those dirty little fibbers told you that I went out with Chip on a second date after you brought me home at midnight that Saturday?"

"Horse-hockey!" And it was, he knew. Chip Granger would never have dated Nikki—not with her face. Too, and after all, she and Bobbitt had been going steady at the time.

"Of course it's horse-hockey," Nikki said now, lower lip still pushed forward. "But maybe what else everybody said back then was true."

"And what might that have been?" he asked grimly.

"That Chip was so good at everything he ever tried—studies, athletics, girls—that he became just a natural hero. And that was why, what with you being not at all like that, you wanted so much to be friends with Chip that you did what you did."

"What the hell did I do!"

"I've told it to you before, Henry. You get so upset. Let's drop it."

"Let's finish the damned thing!"

"In order for you to have been able to have hung around Chip, you just became a big old kiss-ass and did everything he wanted including running all his errands. They said you weren't friends at all, not really, you were just his servant. And so when he left town, you weren't of any more use to him. That's why he's never been in contact with you since, including when he didn't show up for our wedding and be best man like he promised you in blood."

"The purest nonsense I've ever heard!"

"Of course, Henry!" She was smiling again. "And I'll never say all that nonsense again. Promise to try not to think of it ever again. So that you don't get as angry as you are right now. Are you going for your Sunday morning walk when you've finished breakfast?" she added nicely.

Wearing a conservative gray herringbone jacket and dark blue pants, looking older than thirty-eight because of his baldness, he suddenly stopped his Sunday morning walk and stared at the figure standing at the bus stop near the intersection of Madison and Fremont.

The man appeared to be the same age as Bobbitt, an inch

shorter, slim, dark-haired, with a lean, pale, handsome face embellished by a neatly trimmed Vandyke. He wore an open black leather jacket, faded jeans, and black leather motorcycle boots. The silver metal buttons on his blue chambray shirt went down to a huge silver belt buckle. As though detecting Bobbitt's startled scrutiny, the man turned to gaze at Bobbitt, coolly, then turned away again.

Bobbitt gave his head a little shake of disbelief and continued on. No, he told himself, that could not have been Chip Granger. It was some sort of illusion created out of hearing that his fourth, or was it third, wife had been murdered.

Bobbitt jounced along clumsily. Then he stopped again. That costume the man had been wearing—Chip's for sure! He'd dressed in that fashion here in town and then kept on doing it right up the road to prominence and riches. He'd called the costume his uniform, and it was his trademark by now.

Bobbitt did an awkward aboutface and trotted back in the direction of where he'd seen the figure, his double chin jouncing.

Then he heard the hissing of brakes and knew that a bus was arriving. He broke into a

run. But when he was in sight of the intersection, the bus was gone as was the figure.

Early that evening, in his huge living room, seated in his comfortable easy chair with a glass of scotch and soda, he told Nikki about it.

"You're kidding," she responded. Clothied now in a dark dress, wearing a string of pearls, she sat balancing the delicate stem of a glass of white wine between thumb and forefinger.

"I thought at first my senses were. But that's what I saw, all right."

"It's something right out of *Chip Granger's Weird World*, isn't it? You're sure you didn't get into the scotch before now? No, but that's ridiculous. Two scotch and sodas a day for you and no more. You never go wild about anything, do you, Henry? Well, now, wait a minute. There is something, isn't there, stud?"

He knew exactly what she meant. And he couldn't deny it, certainly. How he'd managed to restrain himself as long as he had, earlier in their lives, was hard to understand now. But he'd been brought up in a very strict Protestant home, and his mother had been adamant that he resist the licentiousness of the times and save himself ex-

clusively for his eventual spouse.

So he hadn't given in to that nearly unbearable urge all the way through college. And it was only when he'd graduated and they were picnicking on a lone stretch of beach on the coast that Nikki had stripped him of his lock on chastity by saying:

"Henry, why don't you ask me to marry you, because nobody else is ever going to. And why, now that you're done with college, don't you go to work for my father in the bank so that you'll never have to worry about money again. And why don't you seal the deal, for God's sake, and after all this time, by letting me give you a joy ride you'll never forget."

She'd given him that joy ride as promised. And she still had the capacity to do it. He'd never wanted to think too much about how she came to be so proficient at such a thing; he'd simply forced himself to believe that it all came naturally to her because she'd never worried about the propriety of it as he had.

Now it was after dinner, and they were again seated in the gigantic living room.

"Was it or wasn't it?" Bobbitt asked. "Well, I think I know by now. Chip Granger, all right." He wanted to think so, he real-

ized finally. It would mean that Chip had finally returned and that they'd been no more than feet away from one another, Chip and Henry, together again, like old times.

"Well, if it was Chip at that bus stop, he couldn't have murdered that third wife of his, could he? You can't be here and in Pasadena at the same time. But you're really not certain."

"Who else, for God's sake, would dress like that, *look* like that? It absolutely had to be Chip."

She put her wine glass down and leaned forward, resting elbows on knees, chin on the heels of her hands, smiling mischievously. "There's one way you could have been sure, lover. Do you remember, when he was fifteen, how he started wearing the bandage on his chest?"

"I think so. Yeah. All the time. In the locker, showering, even swimming. He said he'd developed this red blotch. Didn't want people to see it."

"Blotch, baloney. It was a tattoo."

He looked at her sharply. "What are you saying?"

"A rattlesnake, a coiled western diamondback, with an extra-wide head. About two inches wide and high. He took a bus up to San Francisco on his fifteenth birthday and met

this guy who had some whisky. Decided to have his chest tattooed. When he got home and sobered up, he refused to show it to anyone except, well—"

"Except *whom*?"

"All the girls he took his clothes off for."

He was silent for a time, feeling his pulse beating in a temple. He was staring at her big lower lip now, and suddenly it assumed that beestung look. Then that disappeared. And he was not at all certain if it had been real or an illusion. "All the girls, eh?" he said loudly. "And just who does that include, by the goddamned way?"

"You know how he affected the opposite sex, for heaven's sake. He was your best friend. How could you not know they dropped like flies if he so much as glanced at them. I guess the bandage came off one time. He found out that snake turned them on. Oh, now wait a minute, Henry. Surely you don't think—I mean that would be so ridiculous!"

"Yes, it would be!"

"We're getting all worked up over nothing. I was just told about the tattoo and how he got it by those other girls. Now. Did that person you thought might be Chip have his blue chambray shirt buttoned up from neck to waist?"

Henry paused, then: "I'm not sure, now that I think about it."

"Of course you're sure. You're beginning to hedge, aren't you? You *know* that wasn't Chip Granger, don't you? Why don't you admit it?"

"It just might have been! Who *else* was it?"

"Whether it was or wasn't, why do you still hate him so very much?"

"Because he's a sellout!"

"What has he sold out to?"

"Anything, for success."

"How would you know that? You haven't heard from him since he left town. That was ten years ago."

"You think I don't know what that show-biz life is like? I read the right newspapers and the right magazines. You've got to sell your soul, brother."

"I didn't realize you were such a worldly son of a bitch. The father of our children, and I still didn't know!"

"That, anyway, is why I hate him. He sold out. I never want a thing to do with him, not ever again. You know *I've* never sold out a single thing, not in my entire existence."

The corners of the wide mouth were turning up now. "You married me, which got you your present station in life, sweetheart."

"Yes, but who asked whom to

marry whom?" Bobbitt replied, looking archly self-satisfied.

"Okay. Suppose it *was* Chip then, real and in the flesh. Try this on for size, lover. If it really was the best friend you ever had, what happened when he saw you at Madison and Fremont? Nothing, right? He just gave you the cold eye—that's according to your own testimony. That's a kick in the ass from your dearest friend, isn't it? Speak to me, dude."

He suddenly snapped his fingers, realizing something. "I'm going to my study."

"Not for long. You have certain obligations, and don't ever forget it."

He sat down at the large solid-oak desk in his study and wrote on a yellow legal pad:

Dear Chip,

How many times have I thought of writing to tell you how much I really have admired your tremendous success. Everyone who knew you back here in your old hometown feels the same way. Good going, fella! Keep up the good work!

To bring you up to date on me is pretty simple. I married Nikki Fickler. (And, listen, it never bothered me that you didn't get

back to be my best man as we agreed in blood to do for one another way back when we were young. I always figured the invitation, along with my accompanying letter saying I was counting on you, just never reached you. And, after all, I've never been your best man either, as we agreed would be the case so many years ago. When you count the number of times I've missed out on that, I guess I'm a whole lot more remiss than you, eh?)

Anyway, we're the parents of two, a boy eight and a girl seven, both away at private schools right now. I have somehow gotten to be first vice-president of the Second West Coast Security Bank. And I guess that's about all the boring stuff you'd care to hear from me, living in the center of glamor and excitement as you do.

Except there's this. Today, on my Sunday constitutional, I reached the corner of Madison and Fremont. And what did I see? A spitting image of Chip Granger, standing right there at the bus stop! That leather jacket, faded jeans, blue chambray

shirt, black motorcycle boots, the works! Good-looking as ever with all that thick black hair and the old Vandyke beard!

It is, I said to myself. But, no, it couldn't be, I replied. Then you looked right at me, cold as ice, and away. And I walked on, knowing that couldn't have been you or you'd have yelled, "Hey, there, Henry Bobbitt, you old son of a gun, you!"

But then something finally came to me! I would have recognized you, certainly, having seen you on TV so many times these recent years. But how in the world would you have known me after all the years? I'll have to admit I'm in the vicinity of forty pounds heavier than the last time you saw me. The hair was gone by the time I turned thirty. I started wearing black-rimmed glasses about a year ago. I thought, well, surely you'd have phoned me you were going to be in town. But our phone's unlisted. You wouldn't know where I was employed. You don't have our present address.

You see?

So I finally understand. And all I can tell you now

is that the big, fat, bald-headed fellow you saw wearing the gray herring-bone jacket was your old buddy. I'm sorry as hell I didn't just stop and identify myself so you could have done the same. But it's done and over.

So now we know. And I hope you'll get in touch with me at your first opportunity, good friend, so that we can once again re-establish a relationship that never should have gone awry.

Nikki joins me in sending you our very best.

He did not tell her about the letter, of course. He just took the yellow page from the legal pad to his office and gave it to Mrs. Mumsford, the older imperturbable secretary who had come with his current position. He asked her to transcribe it on the bank's letterhead. He then instructed her to go to the public library and look up how Chip Granger could be contacted in the American *Who's Who*, which turned out to be his agent's address in Beverly Hills. When she gave him the typed letter for his signature, he handwrote a P.S., giving Chip Granger his own home address and unlisted home number.

Every day after that Bobbitt waited for Chip Granger's response. At the end of two weeks he instructed Mrs. Mumsford to put in a call to Granger's agent in Beverly Hills. When she had his executive secretary on the line, Bobbitt got on, too, saying:

"I'm an old friend of Mr. Granger's. I wrote him a letter not long ago and sent it in care of your office. It was on gray bank stationery, and—"

"The Second West Coast Security Bank?"

"Yes, ma'am. You see—"

"I handed it to Mr. Granger personally."

At home, in the great living room, Nikki gave Bobbitt his scotch and soda, seated herself with her glass of wine, and said a little breathlessly, "I've read three newspapers and listened to TV including Donahue, Oprah, and Geraldo, who each had women who'd been good friends of Chip's murdered ex-wife. They admitted the ex was a shrew and had bedeviled him day in and day out, for money, for a reconciliation, whatever. CNN wrangled an exclusive story right out of Chip's own mouth, which they reported word for word, even if they didn't have him on camera. So I know everything. He was arrested on suspicion of manslaughter."

Bobbitt's eyes narrowed, he sipped, and then he said, "Arrested, eh?"

"But he's free on big-bucks bail right now."

"The son of a bitch!"

"I knew you'd be pleased, lover. He's denying he was even in the Los Angeles area that day, let alone inside the motel where his ex was put away. No incriminating fingerprints on the letter opener used to kill the woman. But the authorities say they've now got two witnesses who insist they saw Chip that day in Glendale and Alhambra, both bordering Pasadena where the lady was wasted. He was in his usual costume each time. That's why he's charged with manslaughter. If it had been premeditated, he certainly wouldn't have been in uniform."

Bobbitt was smiling now. "I'm so awfully sorry to hear that. Where does he say he was?"

"Driving up the coast, alone, in the oldest, cheapest of his five cars. Forgot his credit cards and paid cash for gasoline. Said he wasn't wearing his uniform. Which is why nobody remembers seeing him to give him an alibi."

"What about the Chip Granger those people claimed they saw in Glendale and Alhambra?"

"The real Chip insists there're crazies all over the country who dress up like him, complete with beard, just to be mistaken for Chip Granger. Said Papa Hemingway had the same problem. Willie Nelson, too. Some others. A pain in the ass that goes with the territory. They were in Glendale and Alhambra that day. And it was one of those same pains in the ass that you saw at Madison and Fremont, wasn't it, dude?"

Henry Bobbitt closed his eyes and thought about it for a few moments. Then he said, "Actually, no, I don't think so."

"No?" Nikki asked with surprise.

Bobbitt sighed and looked apologetic. "I saw the real thing."

"In person?"

Bobbitt nodded.

"But how do you know?"

"The snake," Bobbitt admitted. And now he was seeing in his mind's eyes those silver buttons of the blue chambray shirt popping open, one after another, right down the front of the figure he'd seen at Madison and Fremont. The shirt then was open, from throat to silver belt buckle. And there it was, as real as anything he'd ever remembered seeing: the snake on the man's chest.

Nikki bent forward, looking at him searchingly. "How'd you see through his shirt?"

"It was open down to his belt buckle."

She got up. She crossed to him. She leaned down, looking him squarely in the eyes. "Henry," she said, "you son of a gun, you! You're lying. I can tell by your eyes. But you're going to insist, aren't you? Because that way you've got him by the balls!"

Bobbitt shrugged, looking pleased.

"Henry," she whispered, "I didn't think you had it in you. I honestly didn't. How're you going to do it?"

"I'll do it."

"Oh, God! Let's go upstairs so you can exercise every marital prerogative you ever dreamed about."

"I have to spend a few moments in my study, my dear, and then I intend to do just that."

Dear Chip Granger (he wrote on a yellow legal pad):

I found out yesterday from the office of your agent that my letter, mailed two weeks and one day ago, was personally handed to you. Your failure to respond is in the same tradition as your failure to respond to my asking you to be my best man when I married

Nikki Fickler, daughter of Rudy Fickler, president of the Second West Coast Security Bank. Please regard everything written in that first letter as the purest of bullshit. The truth is that I have always regarded you as a pretentious and laughable clown of the first degree. When they passed out the writing talent you purportedly own, ho, ho, you were behind the door.

I am finally going to be honest all around and therefore tell you here and now, once and for all, to stick it up your ass. Oh, that was me, all right, on the morning of October tenth at Madison and Fremont, forty pounds heavier, black-rimmed glasses, wearing a gray herringbone jacket. And that was you, too, all right. Although I didn't mention why I knew that for sure, aside from the black leather jacket, faded denims, black leather motorcycle boots, and blue chambray shirt, I'll now note that the shirt was unbuttoned from your neck to your belt buckle so that the coiled big-headed diamondback rattlesnake tat-

*too on your chest was
clearly visible.*

Go to hell, for all I care.

Two days later, his after-work drink in hand once more, Bobbitt sat in his chair smiling. He'd just told Nikki about the two letters.

"So then when do you figure to hear from him, you devil?" she asked, giggling.

The telephone on the end table beside his chair began ringing. "Now?" He lifted the instrument, saying, "Bobbitt here."

"Hey, guy!" sounded the familiar rich baritone voice. "Is that really you I'm talking to? Honest to God, is it?"

"Chip?" he asked.

"You bet it is, guy! Hey, and let me apologize for a couple of things right at the beginning, okay?"

"Whatever, I guess."

"First, my missing being your best man when you married Vicky!"

"Nikki."

"It was exactly what you said in your letter to me of October tenth—I never got the invitation or your letter saying you were counting on me. I guess you just can't trust the postal service, eh?"

"But that means, I take it, that you did get my letter written on October tenth. At least I

was told by your agent's executive secretary that she handed it to you personally."

"True, guy! Absolutely! And I remember looking at the printed return—the Second West Coast Security Bank back in the old hometown. And I thought why is that bank writing me? After that, I don't know what the hell happened. I got into one of my cars, the Mercedes convertible it was. And the only thing I can figure out is that when I was driving down to the ocean and my place in Malibu, the wind blew it away. But, of course, when I received your second letter today I knew exactly who'd written me that first letter. God, I'm sorry, Henry!"

"No problem, Chip," Bobbitt said easily.

"The rattler!" said Chip Granger. "I don't remember your knowing about that—none of you guys, as a matter of fact."

"I found out from, ah, several young ladies. They were always comparing me . . . if you get what I mean. That's when the snake would come up."

"Henry, I had no *idea* that you and those same girls that I—"

"Never judge a book by its cover, Chipper."

"Never do it again. So then how many people know about

that tattoo? A few select damsels and you? And you saw it on my chest when I was in your town on the morning of October tenth?"

Bobbitt looked again at Nikki. The beesting on her lower lip appeared and disappeared. Or gave the illusion that it had. "I would swear it on twenty Bibles."

"All right, then! Let me explain about my being there that day. I had an idea for a story, using the old hometown for a background. Hadn't been there in years. Decided to drive up the coast. So once I got there, the first thing I tried to do was get in touch with the best goddamned friend I ever had or ever will have—you, Henry. But it was just like you wrote. I didn't have your address or phone number. Didn't know where you were working. Haven't been in touch with anybody there so I could ask them. So I just took business around, looking, looking, wearing the old Fonzie jacket and all that stuff. Hit the intersection at Madison and Fremont, where you saw me. Changed my mind about a story being there. And I just took off. Henry, I never realized that was you wearing the herringbone jacket, forty pounds heavier, bald, with the black-rimmed glasses. *Never sus-*

pected! How are you doing anyway, old buddy! It's so *good* to hear your voice!"

"Good to hear yours, too, Chip," Bobbitt said. "I'm doing just fine. But I'm sorry about the news I've heard about you. The third wife and the stabbing and your being arrested on suspicion because a couple of people saw you in the area that same day. I—"

"Now, Henry, I'm glad you brought that up. It's time you and I were back friends again. So I can show you around Hollywood. So you can meet my friends in show business. Henry, would you do me a very important favor?"

Bobbitt was looking again at Nikki, who stared back at him brightly. "What favor might that be, Chip?"

"They've given me permission to fly up there tomorrow morning. So I'll be coming into San Francisco International on Western Airways Flight 605, arriving at eight thirty. Then I'll explain. God, I'm anxious to see you and Vicky again, Henry! I'll rent a car and—"

"No, you won't. Nikki and I'll be there to meet you."

"Fantastic! But can I impose upon you and ask you to reserve a room overnight for me at the Hotel Saunders?"

"You cannot. We've got enough bedrooms in this house

to take care of sixty, and you're getting the best one."

"Where've the years gone, Henry! They haven't been the same without you!"

The next morning Nikki drove, Bobbitt sat beside her wearing a dark well-tailored business suit. "When we get to the airport," she said, "you go in and I'll cruise around so I can pick up the two of you the instant you come out of the terminal."

Bobbitt was inside the designated waiting room when passengers from Flight 605 filed in. Chip Granger came into view wearing his uniform and holding a black carry-on bag. When he stopped inside the room Bobbitt saw with pleasure that everyone else there began staring at him.

"Hey, there, Henry Bobbitt," he shouted in the familiar baritone, "you old son of a gun, you!"

Bobbitt hurried forward swiftly, clumsily, knowing that he was indeed going to relish every minute of this.

Chip was signing autographs by the time Bobbitt reached him, but the man stopped to shake hands, nearly numbing Bobbitt's fingers with the pressure.

"Henry, Henry, Henry! Where in the devil is Vicky?"

"Out circling the Chrysler around so she can pick us up fast when we get out of here."

"Good, good! But listen, Henry. I've decided the sooner the better." A hand dug into a pocket of the bag and came out. "Take this stuff. That top paper has the name of the person you're to see in the D.A.'s office. The envelope has money to cover everything while you're down there. I've got you reserved at the Beverly Hilton—a Trader Vic's is right there for dinner. And here're the airline tickets. You've got less than ten minutes to check in. How can I ever thank you, Henry? But don't just stand there. Get going! *Now!*"

The next afternoon, when Henry returned from Los Angeles, he saw Nikki waiting for him, alone.

"Gone?" he asked dully.

"Yes." Her eyes were shining. Her cheeks seemed to glow. "He left after his agent phoned. Because of what you told them yesterday, seeing the tattoo and all, plus being the pillar of respectability as first vice-president of the bank and being married to the president's daughter, all of that, Chip was no longer under suspicion. Some important work came up he couldn't escape. So he said he was terribly sorry.

But he promised to get up here again some day soon."

Bobbitt nodded listlessly as they walked down a terminal hallway. "I certainly hope he was able to make himself comfortable in our home last night."

He glanced sideways to see that she was smiling broadly with her big fat mouth. "Oh my God, yes!"

Almost falling because of his innate clumsiness, he watched that lower lip of hers taking on the beestung look. Then that disappeared. And, in his mind, he was again seeing the figure standing at the intersection of

Madison and Fremont. Silver buttons of the blue chambray began unfastening so that the rattlesnake was revealed. The buttons refastened themselves. The snake was gone.

"Henry, be careful," she warned. "You're tripping over yourself."

And he said loudly, "He's a sellout!"

"People are staring, Henry."

"A rotten sellout! That's all he is!"

"Shhhhhh."

But he continued, louder than ever: "And that's one thing I've never been! And never will be! *Never!* Do you understand that?"

East End Safe

by Jas. R. Petrin

This was the plan. Ma parks at the back by the loading dock, she sees anyone up the alley, either direction, she pulls a sun visor down—left for east, right for west. George, on the third floor landing at the elevator, keeps an eye out the window on the front of Ma's car. He shouts down the aisle at Zeke if there's a signal. Zeke is in the manager's office drilling out the safe.

Easy.

Zeke said it would be easy, going in, saying, "Listen, bro, I studied that place to *death*, understand? To *death*."

Repeating that word "death."

George wished he would find another expression to use. Zeke used to say he was "scoping a place out," but he hadn't said that since the debacle at the Royal Eddy when Ma tried to whack the biker out the car window with the lunchbox and the money blew away.

This was different.

Plain sailing, Zeke said; throwing that around, too.

Zeke saying there were offices in the building, and in one

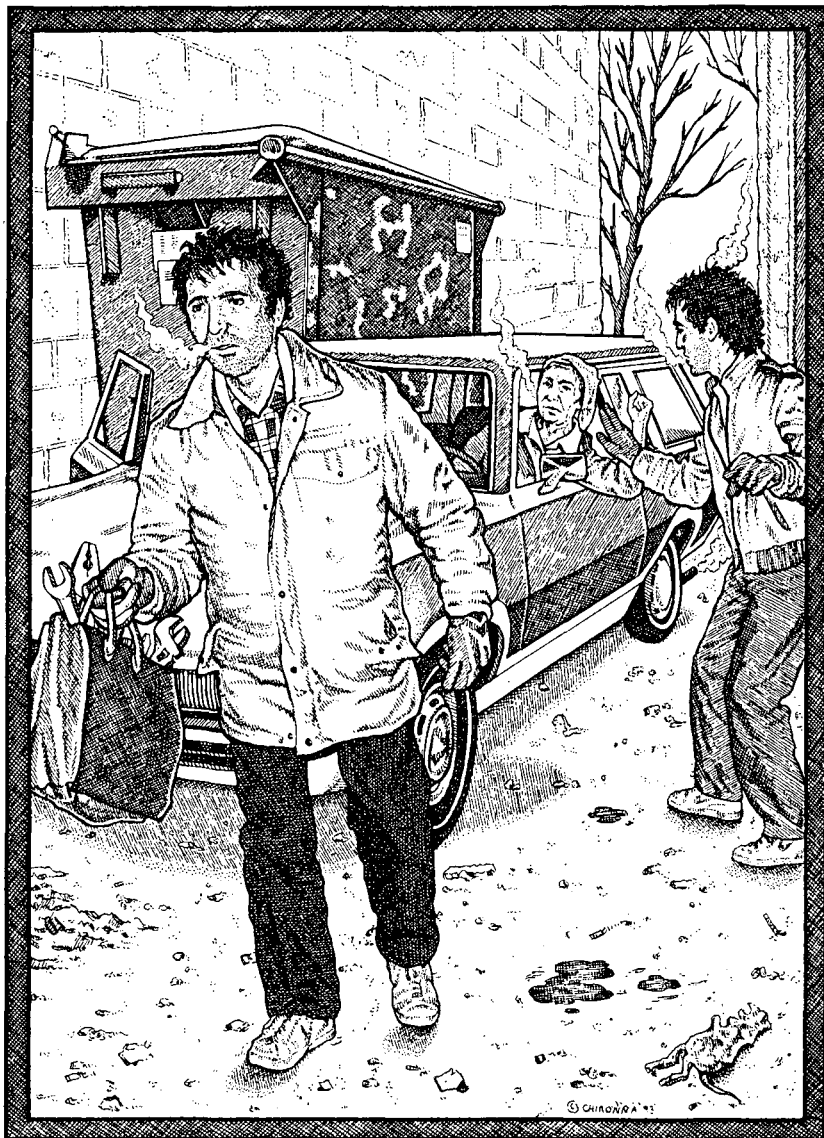
of those offices there was a safe. Studying the situation "to *death*," he'd figured out which office had the safe with the money in it, and he said getting their hands on that money would be "plain sailing." Ma standing there ironing Zeke's shirt on the kitchen table, wetting it down with sprinkles of water from a plastic vinegar jug, the iron hissing, the steam billowing, her eyebrows knotted over her nose, said, "Plain sailing! If there's a rock in a ditch, you'll find it."

But here they were.

George said, pointing, "Okay, Ma, there's the BFI dumpster, that's where you park." Ma grumbling, "Think I don't know a giant garbage can when I see one, you weasel?" and "Why do I have to park there, for crying in the sink? All that smell!"

"You know why, Ma. It's the only place you can see both directions up the alley, and it gives us three ways out—east, west, or south if we need it, up that intersecting lane."

"It starts giving me a headache, that stink," Ma said, "I'll



"I'M TELLING YOU I'M COOL, AREN'T I? SO SHUT UP ABOUT IT!"

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take a way out. You better believe it. I'll be outa here like a cat leaving an argument, all three ways at once."

George telling her, "Ma, you got to stay cool, you got to keep calm, you can't lose it, Ma, me and Zeke are depending on you."

"I'm always cool!"

"Staying cool is the thing, Ma."

"I'm *telling* you I'm cool, aren't I? So shut up about it!"

"Sure, Ma."

"You weasel!"

"I know you won't let us down, Ma."

"You *think* you know, you and your weasel brother, taking me for granted. Fact is, you don't know nothing, neither one of you." She jerked the Dodge wagon to a halt by the dumpster, reversed in with a rush, braked to a head-rolling stop. "And another thing. You damn well hurry up about it, the pair of you. Move your butts. In and then out. I mean it. I'm gonna miss my *EastEnders* episode all on account of this foolishness!"

"Foolishness? We're talking twenty thousand dollars here, Ma."

"Listen to it. I had all the money you and your dumb brother dreamed up, I could watch *EastEnders* on a forty inch screen—"

"After tonight, we'll buy it..."

"—in my Lear jet," Ma finished. "So get the lead out, both of you. And keep it out. Else you can hitchhike home. Steal a bike. A dogsled. I don't know. Walk!"

George got out of the car, stooped, and put his head down low so he could speak calmly to Ma through the half-open door, his breath pushing out little puffs of icy mist.

"Ma. Now remember. It's easy. The left visor for east—'cause that's how it's lined up. And the right—"

"*EastEnders* starts in one hour and fifteen minutes," Ma said, "and if I miss finding out how come the barman got arrested, I won't be fit to live with. I'm telling you!"

He believed her.

Ma sitting there, a stocky woman in a green canvas jacket, print dress, bare legs showing where her ankle socks began. Broad hands on the wheel like a lady farmer set to rake a field. And that jaw. That Boyer jaw. You could plow a furrow with it.

George took one last look at her, gave a shiver—man, it was cold—then hurried across the alley to the door Zeke had left open on purpose for him and let himself inside.

Alphonse Rey came out of the little back toilet his partner Cyril liked to call a rest-room—rest, hell, you couldn't even stretch out your legs, you'd put both feet through the sheetrock wall. Cyril, already with his coat on, standing there slapping his white silk gloves against his thigh like a guy with the whole world waiting for him. Man. All this old dude had waiting for him was a concrete condo, six by ten, and a couple hundred cops jockeying for the chance to move him into it.

Maybe the pressure was finally getting to him; Cyril really keyed up and snarly today.

"Took you long enough. What the heck you doing in there?"

"You want a written report?" Rey replied. "I'll tell you what I wasn't doing, I wasn't ballroom dancing. How about that?"

Cyril glowered. Slapping the gloves, *whack*—slapping the gloves, *whack*. And look at the scowl. A bad attitude today for sure, this oldtime heavy growing older by the minute. The eyes shifty. You couldn't trust him. But you stuck close to Cyril because Cyril seemed to know where the money tree grows.

Like this situation.

What it was, Cyril had this arrangement. A straight-up business recycling pop cans, plastic bottles, all that sort of crap—become a businessman, old Cyril, since they'd let him out of Oakalla. But at the same time the shifty old dude's got a more lucrative enterprise on the go, right? Recycling stolen property. He's a fence. And why not, he's certainly got the room for it. That great big building out there in East St. Paul, you couldn't fill it with pop cans if you saved them up twenty years. Lots of room. Space that you filled with TV's, stereos, even snowmobiles, for chris-sake, and you had this great big jeezly safe in the building where you kept a second set of books and also the profits you didn't care to have your accountant thumbing through and asking embarrassing questions about.

Rey had wondered, "But, hey, why bother with books?"

Cyril had answered, "You got partners, you keep books. Partners like books. They like to know how well they're doing. They like to know how well *you're* doing. Especially my partners. They're funny that way."

"And how *are* they doin', Cyril?"

"Terrible. Haven't made a dime in months. I explained it

to them, the economy is down, you don't see the garbage you used to see. But my partners, they're suspicious. Told me they're coming around, check it out for themselves. Be there first thing Monday morning."

"Check what out?"

"The books! Are we talking books here, or aren't we?"

"And you need me and Alex tonight because . . ."

"Because if somebody was to break in before Monday and clean out the safe, take the money, take the books before anyone gets a chance to read them, nobody could say that was my fault, could they?"

Alphonse Rey had simply stared at the old con, grinning. Thinking why not? There's that crappy old building, it's got no alarms, nothing, the dough and the books just sitting there. Cyril explaining to him how anybody could break in at any time, pop that safe, and waltz away with everything in it. Telling him that safe was a piece of junk. Another reason why he, Cyril, had to get busy and pop the damn thing, do it himself before somebody else came along and beat him to it.

Like maybe one of his partners.

Still . . .

"You got the combination," Rey said, "you got the access all day, how come you don't just

put what you want in a paper sack and take it home with you?"

"Maybe I do. Maybe I take lots of things home with me."

"But not the books?"

Cyril getting an edge to his voice now.

"What are you driving at, Alf?"

"Nothing. I'm not driving at nothing. Only thinking to myself, that's all. You could of took the money and the books, left the safe standing there wide open, they'd of thought—"

Cyril broke in, "What *you* should be thinking, if I took the money and books myself, I wouldn't need a guy like you tonight for a thousand dollars, would I?"

That sounded good.

"And another thing. Let me tell you. If you want to convince my partners somebody raided the cookie jar, you got to make sure there's real cookie crumbs scattered around. Not to mention a busted jar. These guys don't convince easy. Know what I'm saying to you?"

Rey just shrugged. Cyril hadn't said much else after that, just sat staring at Rey with his big pouchy eyes, Rey thinking the whole thing was very weird, didn't make sense. But a thousand dollars—hey!

Rey told Cyril it was cool, he'd take the job.

There were footsteps on the stairs. Alex coming up from the car, finally tired of waiting for them. Alphonse Rey perked up immediately.

Here she was, sticking her head in the door.

Rey liked her in that black wool cap, her frizzy dark hair poking out around her face. This girl maybe five foot six, going one fifteen, eyes the color of blue smoke, and teeth straight and white behind firm, pale lips—reminding him what he'd been missing all that time locked up at Oakalla.

She spoke with an accent. A nice bossy tone to it. Rey liked that, too.

"You especk me to wait out there all night? In that old car, you don't even have a heater inside to turn on for me?"

"I'll turn on a heater for you, sweet-cheeks," Rey said, grinning at her. He knew Cyril hated it when he came on to Alex, which was why he did it every chance he got. Cyril always trying to keep the two of them apart, keep them from talking, like he had a thing going for the girl. The age this guy was? He oughtta be finding girlfriends down at the Silver Sixties lodge. "I'll keep you toasty," Rey said, "ride all the way out to the job in the front of the car with you."

"You ride in the trunk with the spare tire," Alex said.

"Oh, I get it. And then you take me out later when you're ready to rock and roll, huh?" He waited. "Spare tire . . . ? Roll . . . ? That's a gag. You got no sense of humor, sweet-knees?"

"Will you cut it out?" Cyril snarled. He reached behind the door and came out with a scarred leather briefcase, one of those old, tough, bulky satchels that opened like a clam. And it looked heavy. Something clanking inside it. Tools. "Make yourself useful an' carry this."

He shoved the thing into Rey's hands like Rey was the hired help, which he was, this leather case that felt like it had a refrigerator in it, and they all went down the rickety wooden stairs together to the cold car waiting in the street.

George stopped and glanced around curiously. He had never actually been in the place before. All he knew about it was what Zeke had told him. Zeke sneaking in with sacks of old pop cans for a month, studying the layout to *death*, then coming home to show George sketches, diagrams, like somebody just back from a tour of the Tower of London, wanting

you to know where the crown jewels were.

Here was the elevator door. And over here was the window. George remembered the drawings. He stepped across the landing and peered out. Jeez, the humidity in the place—steam heat probably, this old dump—he had to scour a spot so he could see through the frost, rubbing his sleeve on the glass.

There was Ma, way down below, parked by the dumpster.

No visors down.

Meaning the coast was still clear or else that Ma had fallen asleep, or died of a fit of anger.

He left the window and walked to the main aisle entrance and peered along it. No lights anywhere he could see. Not that he expected any. Zeke wasn't going to advertise. But forty yards away, down at the end of the aisle, in brown shadow, he could just make out an office door standing ajar, a door that had black lettering on the window and those old fashioned glass-block panels either side of it. The kind of office you expect to look and see Edward G. Robinson come storming out of with a cigar clamped in his teeth.

Cocking his head to one side, listening, George could make out the sound of a drill faintly whining.

Old Zeke beavering away.

George went back to the window. It had already fogged over, and he had to clear himself a spot on the glass again so he could look down and see the front of Ma's car and her two fists tight on the wheel.

Hang in there, Ma . . .

Stay cool . . .

“W haddaya mean, open my window? I'm freezin'

to death back here,” Alphonse Rey complained.

They might as well have shoved him in the trunk with the spare tire, making him ride in the back seat all the way out to East St. Paul like this, Cyril and Alex up front with their goddamn windows wide open and the goddamn wind howling into the back like gangbusters. What did they figure him for—some kinda Nanook of the North or just what?

Cyril with all the answers, of course:

“Alex has to see where she's going—this defroster's hardly working at all—you want we should be pulled over by some nosy cop on a poor visibility charge? Cop gets suspicious, looks in the trunk. Cop opens the bag, says what the hell's this? Is that what you want?”

Rey, with his teeth clenched on a toothpick to keep them from chattering, said, "I want you to know I'm freezing to death, that's what I want."

"It's good for you, that freezing. You need it, you're so hot," Alex said.

"Keep it up, sweetie," Rey told her, "and I promise to let you tie me up and spank me later—you know how I love it when you're mean."

"Some kinda police spot-check. If that's what you want, you tell me," Cyril grumbled.

And then the old con was launching into it again. Saying how *he* mustn't be seen going in or out of the place. How *he* would drive around the block awhile, keep looping by, watching for their signal: they could wave from a window, lower a blind, it didn't matter, he'd spot it. Then he'd stop at the side door and pick them up. Reminding them how once they got inside they were to get in the elevator—not the people one at the front, use the freight one at the back. Go to the *third* floor, did they understand that? Where the office was. Rey's job being to provide the muscle if any was needed. Alex there with him to pop open the safe.

Alphonse Rey had been skeptical at first. A female safe-cracker? He'd never run into one before. But now he'd met

Alex, he had no doubt she was capable of it. She was one of those women seemed capable of anything, if you liked your women that way: switch on the charm, soft and seductive, get you hot and bothered, then blow up in your face like a keg of nails, ready to cut you that many times.

Cyril was still blathering. Telling them again how when they finished the job, they were to go straight down to the street, both of them, meet Cyril there, and then they'd beat it down the road together fast.

Simple.

Simple, at least, to hear Cyril tell it. But he wasn't the one putting his butt on the line, even though the jerk kept whining and going on about it like he was the guy taking all the risk.

Really spooked about it, old Cyril, and that was a fact. Rey wanted to tell him, hey, it's hardly even a robbery—robbing *yourself*, after all. Not like anybody's gonna get killed or nothing.

Cyril back into it, going, "What you got to remember is don't leave any—you know—fingerprints, tools, crap like that lying around." Saying, "What you got to keep in mind, those cops get their hands on me again, I'm gonna be doing long time, hard time." Saying,

"You got to make sure and leave everything clean, don't leave no traces of nothing. You know where I'm coming from on this subject, both of you?"

Alphonse Rey took the toothpick out of his mouth. "Sure. You're telling us you don't wanna go back to Oakalla."

That earned him a dark look, Cyril tossing it at him over one bulky shoulder.

"Hell, the way you say it. Like the joint was your favorite place or something. Come on, Alex, drive the car."

George cleared another spot on the window. Peeked out. There was Ma.

Hi, Ma.

The car down there idling, the heater roaring, Ma inside it all toasty warm. He loosened his jacket. It was warm inside this place, that was a fact. *Too* damn warm.

Or was it he was only getting nervous?

George left the window and moved so that he could look again down the aisle to where Zeke was working. Nothing there. You couldn't see a thing in all that shadow. Just the half-open door there at the far end, a pool of murky yellow light spilling out of it. Maybe Zeke's shadow from time to

time if you stretched your imagination.

The drilling stopped. Then he heard hammering.

George, listening, wondered about that. Sucking at his gums. Could it be old Zeke had run into a problem? Something jammed or stuck, some freak thing come up out of nowhere to slow him down? Did Zeke maybe need another pair of hands to do what he was doing? Should George take the initiative, head down that aisle and have a look in and see for himself?

Well?

He hesitated, guilt cutting sharply through him at the thought of leaving his post. Ma down there in the car ready to give a signal when there was nobody up here to notice it.

But he was getting antsy, and it would only take a minute.

He checked once more out the window, saw Ma in the car, both visors up, made his decision and turned and walked quickly along the dark aisle to the office way down at the end in the shadows. He heard the drill again, then the hammer, metal striking metal, the noises getting louder.

Keep mellow, he told himself. With Zeke it was best to come off easy.

He entered the room.

"Hey, bro, how's it coming? Just looking in to see if maybe you don't need a hand with anything. How's she look?"

Zeke was on hands and knees, his broad backside towards George, a flashlight lying beside him on the floor casting an arc of illumination across the old linoleum. Zeke had on a red lumberjack shirt that was rucked up at the back, showing a quarter-section of plumber's butt, but at George's voice he pulled back from the safe and straightened up to glare at George with one of his glassy, bone-chilling looks.

"Whadda you doing here? Huh? *Huh?*"

Zeke up on his haunches, glaring. Now the guy reaching to pick up a steel bar off the floor, a bar you could take and bat a lead ingot out of a ballpark with. Zeke was a mean piece of work to begin with—unshaven face, hairy forearms, potgut thrusting over his belt—a guy not really needing a steel bar in his hand to make his point but hefting it anyway.

"Get back to that window. Keep your eyes glued and watch out for Ma's signal. Jeez! I can't trust you to do the simplest goddamn thing?"

George scurried out of the room and back along the aisle, arrived at the landing, and glanced out the window, half

expecting to see Ma hemmed in by blue-and-whites. Cops all over her. But no. There she was. All quiet down there, the car idling away just like before. A little plume of exhaust at the back.

Relax.

George slumped against the window, let the cool glass press against his forehead, and closed his eyes. Hurry, Zeke, he thought. Hurry up, bro, we gotta go, go, go . . . !

Alex pulled over at the side of the building and got out of the car while Cyril took her place at the wheel, sliding across the front seat cushion. The car being a two-door, Alphonse Rey had to wait until Cyril was all the way over before he could get out himself, pushing the passenger's seat out of his way and squeezing out the back. Man, he was cold. He thought about a bathtub full of hot, steamy water, he thought about bubbles, he thought about Alex there in the warm water with him. Hey, that was all right. Two hot rums on the edge of the tub. Why not? An idea didn't cost nothing.

Alex was already at the back of the car—all business, that girl—opening the trunk. Rey heard the clank of the leather

case hitting the road. He had his feet out of the car and was about to pull his head and shoulders out into the cool air when he felt a hand on his arm, glanced down, and saw Cyril's white glove hanging onto him.

Cyril was leaning across the seat, eyes like little cold stones someone had stuck in his stony face.

"You're gonna mind your P's and Q's, ain't you, Al? With Alex, I mean. You're gonna do just what she tells you. *Exactly* what she tells you. I set this up perfect, see, every detail. It's gotta go smooth. You screw it up, and . . ." He paused as if he thought he should explain himself further. "That girl, you know she's like a daughter to me."

Oh, really. Was that the reason?

Alphonse Rey didn't like being grabbed. Not by Cyril, not by anybody. He purposely let his coat fall open so that Cyril could see the Charter Arms Bulldog .44 tucked up there, bulging the sateen lining. He knew Cyril would be packing as well, probably had his Browning automatic with him; but, hey—lookit, pal, don't forget I got a piece here, too. Alphonse Rey didn't say anything to Cyril, he didn't think he had to. He simply let him see the gun, waited, and smiled, put-

ting a lot of teeth into it but not much else until the big jerk finally let go of him.

A daughter.

Who was he trying to kid?

"Come on," Alex snapped, already walking toward the building, leaving the toolbag there on the road as if she didn't give a damn whether he picked it up and brought it along or not.

Reminding him who was the grunt around here.

Great gal, fun to be with.

As Cyril drove off, Alphonse Rey picked up the bag.

"Lead the way, sweet-lips. Like it says in the song, I'm gonna be your beast of burden."

"You are a beast, that much is for sure," Alex said. "And you are a burden also."

Come on, come on!

Cyril beat the dash with his free hand as he drove the car. Thunk! Then went busily back to scratching frost off the inside of the windshield with the edge of a credit card, his thick face all knotted up and red.

Hurry! he told himself.

He didn't want to miss any of the action. He'd spent a lot of time on this thing, planning it, setting it up. The results would be coming in any minute now, and he meant to be on hand to be a witness to them. He had to

make sure of the results, didn't he?

Guide the car around the block to the entry of the alley that led up to the warehouse from the south, drive up close, then find a good spot to stop and observe the action.

Already rehearsing the speech he would give to his partners.

"—What's it coming to, a guy can't even operate a business in this town. Somebody busts his damn window, blows his damn safe? Where are the cops in this city when you need them, huh? You answer me that? Listen, do I pay taxes for police protection or don't I? That's what I wanna know."

Yeah. He liked the sound of it. The bit about the taxes, that was a nice touch.

He headed into the alley. Pounding the dash—thunk! Scraping the window some more.

“Well,” Ma said with a snort, looking in her rear view, “shuck on a shag rug! Now what? Who's this coming along out of nowhere, some strange car, and what do they expect me to do about it?”

In the mirror she could see the car coming toward her, fast, up the intersecting alley. Not

from the east, not from the west, but look at it—from the south. How was she supposed to signal that? Lower both sun visors at once? Sure. The weasels saw that, they'd probably think they were surrounded, take a yelling panic-connip-tion-fit, leap off the roof, and explode, those dopes. Blink her lights? Boy! That Zeke. Screwing up instructions.

She glanced at her mirror again, taking a closer look at the car. It was slowing. A big old sedan, all frosted up. Couldn't be a cop.

“Guess I got to just wait . . .”

George couldn't believe how long this job was taking. Back at Ma's, they had figured on ten, fifteen minutes tops. A bit of drilling, then Zeke would come along the aisle with a sackful of money, and they'd be down the stairs, gone. Only it wasn't working out that way. Here George was, pacing the landing as if he had a bladder problem, taking little nervous steps. Making fists out of his hands because he didn't know what else to do with them.

He came even with the aisle for the fiftieth time, took a few tiny steps along it, strained his ears and listened. Dead silence down there now. That way the last five minutes.

Dead silence—right. There was that reference to death again. Doing it himself now. Like an omen.

Something he really wanted to know, how could Zeke be opening a safe without making any noise?

What was he *doing*?

George called out loud as he dared, “Zeke, you okay? We gotta get going, man, we—”

Zeke’s response was loud and immediate. Echoing off the dusty walls of the place.

“You’ll get going when I toss you out the window!”

“Zeke—”

“When I come there and give you a quick trip to the basement down the elevator shaft, you’ll get going. You hearing me, bro?”

The car was twenty yards behind Ma. It stopped. Both vehicles faced the building. Ma tweaked her mirror a bit so that she could keep an eye on things without being obvious; but she couldn’t see into the car too well. It had those weird kind of windows with the glass smoked nearly black. And they looked all frozen up, too. A wonder the driver could even look out at the road.

“What the heck do they *want*?” Ma grumbled.

She knew what *she* wanted—to be alone. She wasn’t

comfortable having a spectator on hand to witness George and Zeke emerge into the lane. She glanced up the left alley, then up the right one, didn’t see anything. Looked at the car again.

Shook her head, muttering, “Judas on a slide trombone . . .”

They were in the freight elevator, creeping up. It was like the cage at Oakalla, only grimmer. Bars in the gate and sides, but open on the top, with cables up there climbing away into the gloom.

Alphonse Rey said, “That Cyril, babe. What do you see in the guy?”

“I don’t see nothing in him. Only Cyril. That is what I see.”

“Babe, that dude, he uses people. Uses ’em up and throws ’em out with the trash just as soon as he’s done with them.”

“No kidding.”

“And he’s way too old for you anyway.”

“Oh my. And you are too young. Poor me, uh?”

This girl just wasn’t listening. Talk to her some more.

“Know what that loser did in the joint, sweet-mouth? Every day he’d stay on the tier, sit in his house like some hotshot crime boss, and watch TV. That was his whole life. What the guy did. Sit around, watch TV—don’t go to the gym, don’t play cards, don’t come outa that

house and take a walk even. A con who won't walk! The rest of us, all we did was walk. TV. Like an old baba, which is what this Ukrainian guard used to say about him. Still is."

"Baba?"

"A grammar. What he is. An old grammar."

"I don't hear you say this thing to his face."

"Senior citizen like him? I'd be afraid to stress him out, doll, that's all it is. Afraid to get him all upset, an' then maybe something inside of him suddenly busts, his heart lets go, or his brain, they just quit or something. I wouldn't wanna be responsible."

"Listen. You don't want to make him mad in case he pick you up an' t'row you out the door."

Alex stooped to haul the elevator door up by its leather strap, and Alphonse Rey couldn't help but admire her form. Standing by the big leather bag, ready to follow her out of the elevator, he couldn't resist patting her blue denim bottom, telling her, "You know, doll, the things you say, you make it very hard for me to go on being a po-lite guy."

George heard the elevator start up. When he heard that sound, he came to attention fast. The snap and creak of the

cables. And voices down there, too, muffled and far away. These sounds in some lower part of the building.

He thought, *damn!*

He forgot about Ma. Beat it fast for the office at the end of the aisle, the Edward G. Robinson door, burst in and found Zeke just getting to his feet and tucking his shirttail in, an unlit cigarette poking out of his mouth. Zeke trying to quit.

"What now?" Zeke snarled.

"Didn't you hear it?"

George couldn't keep the panic sound out of his voice.

"Hear what?"

"The elevator! Electric motor switching on!"

"Wish I could switch you off."

"There's somebody coming. I heard voices, Zeke!"

"Tell you what," Zeke said, "next time you hear voices, ask 'em if they're some kinda dead, departed spirits. Them things that float? Introduce yourself. Make friends. Because, little brother, you're gonna be one of 'em just as soon as we get to a nice safe place where I can beat you to death with a stick."

"You don't believe me?"

They both heard the sudden loud creak at the end of the hall, a swell of voices.

Zeke sucked in his breath and blew it out again. Glanced back regretfully at the unsprung safe. Then he said,

"Gimme a hand. Grab them tools. Those stairs in the corner? We're down them and outa here. Go."

Ma had given the matter some serious thought before getting out of the car. Wondering if maybe the guy simply had car trouble—engine frozen up or something, all that frost on the glass. Ma could give the driver some free advice. How to make a car like that go. Drop a lit match in the gas tank, stand back, and then see the thing move out in a hurry—straight up. But she remembered George and Zeke and knew she had to do something to see if she couldn't help get this guy rolling again.

She had cables in the back. She would ask the driver if the car needed a boost. If the driver asked who she was, she would say her name was Smith, that she was waiting for the BFI truck to come by, the driver was her son, she had a message for him . . . Yeah, that sounded good. His uncle had just died. In Vancouver. A liver problem. See, the guy was a drinker . . .

The story grew by itself in her mind as she got out of the car, trudged along the alley in the snow. She would help this guy. It was against her principles, but she would do it.

It didn't work out that way.

What actually happened, she marched up to the dark glass window and banged on it with her key. A couple of raps. But no response. Right away she started getting mad. The guy inside couldn't hear her, his ear just five inches away? There was movement behind the dark, frosty glass, it seemed like the driver was turning to stare at her. But no action. Ma rapped harder. Then she hit the window with her fist. Finally the window jerked down, making a grinding sound, scaly with frost.

Angry eyes glared out at her.

Ma had forgotten her speech, she was already so mad at this guy. She snapped at the eyes, "Listen you—move along!"

"What?"

"You heard me," Ma said, "get moving!"

The voice answered, "You a bag lady or something, waiting by the trash? Get outa here," the voice told her. And the window zipped shut.

Ma stood staring at the glass a minute. Thinking it over. Not sure she'd heard it right, giving it some time. What had the guy called her?

A bag lady?

Jesus.

She walked back to the rear of the Dodge, brushed the snow off with her mitt, and popped

open the tailgate. She reached in under the trap and fumbled around until she finally closed her hand on what she was looking for. The cold steel of the tire iron.

Then she marched back to the frozen car.

Rey watched Alex move, the girl quick as a cat. She took two brisk strides out of the elevator, and before Rey could follow her, she spun around and faced him with a small black automatic in her hand. The little gun had come out of nowhere. Just like that. Magic. He stopped and stood there looking at her. Trying to make sense out of this. It was a matter of reflex to laugh, try and joke it away.

"Hey, sweet-eyes, you don't need that thing, I'm the one supposed to take care of the muscle around here—"

"And I take care of the muscle-head," Alex said.

The gun didn't waver.

"Alex, listen, we're partners—"

"You think that, uh? You don't even know, do you, what you are brought to this place for?"

Alphonse Rey stared. Shrugged his shoulders. Trying to understand this dark, slim woman with the gun in her

hand. Giving him riddles. What was she talking about?

Alex said, "All the time you make fun of Cyril, you think he is the fool. But now you can see the truth. He is the thinker, and you are the one who is the fool."

"Look, I dunno what I mighta said got you goin' like this, sweet—"

"Stop calling me that! Sweet! All the time sweet! You talk to me like I'm a kid. You doan know nothing about me. If I tole you, where I grew up, we play with shell casings for toys. If I tole you when I was ten year old I shot a man, a soldier, trying to break in our home, steal our food, maybe murder us. If I tole you a hundred things like that, you would still grin and call me sweet? Stupid. What you think Cyril hires someone like me for, uh? What?"

"I dunno, babe," Rey said. Anxious now, thinking this scene was not shaping up very well. Feeling the tension build. Thinking about the Bulldog .44 and wondering was there any way to get it out of his coat without that little automatic poking a hole in him. Rey going, "Listen, ain't you and me supposed to get busy and take care of that safe of Cyril's right away?"

"You believe that, too?"

Rey had to admit he'd been doubtful. Now he didn't know what to think. He shrank back a little, moving his hand nearer his open coat.

"I dunno. I guess I got to ask you this—what *does* Cyril hire you for?"

"He hire me for one thing. To kill somebody."

It was at that moment Rey saw the situation clearly. What he should have understood before. That Cyril would need more than a broken window and a busted safe to convince those hard-assed partners of his that the company records had been burglarized.

What it was, old Cyril had set him up.

The minute Alphonse Rey understood this and accepted it, he knew that the present moment was his only window of opportunity, this split second with Alex watching to see the effect her words were having. Very bad odds, but he took them. Leaping to one side, pumping his hand into his coat, actually feeling the butt of the Bulldog at the tips of his fingers while realizing damn, oh damn, he was going to be way too late. The automatic not jumping wildly in Alex's hand as he'd hoped, but moving in a very controlled manner, tracking him steadily.

Then she shot him.

Rey didn't feel the bullet hit, just a sudden weakness in his legs. Felt himself going down and thought, man, it's a small caliber weapon she's got, the slug don't hardly knock you back at all. Thinking, how about that, Cyril set me up, my old Oakalla buddy. Thinking, jeez, my coat's gonna get all dirty on this goddamn elevator floor . . .

Alex watched the body of Alphonse Rey for a full minute. It didn't move. She felt satisfied with herself, her professionalism. One shot. Economy. When the minute was up, she put the automatic away in her jacket, stooped and gathered up the Charter Arms revolver, and put that in her jacket, too. She dragged the leather toolbag out of the cage, then reached back inside to punch the button that started the elevator moving—no safety breaker on this old thing—sending it back on down to the main floor.

Cyril wanting it that way.

Managing every detail.

The reason he gave, it was to make sure his partners had something to talk about. Tickled at playing detective, they'd tell him, look, see this? Whoever broke in, they had a scuffle in the cage while they were leaving the scene, one of them almost made it, but then, look, he got plugged. See this?

After Alphonse Rey was taken care of, she was to go ahead on and break open the safe.

What for? Give her the combination and she'd open it, she said.

He told her, Listen, he wasn't kidding about his partners, there'd have to be signs of forced entry. He thought some more about it, then said, no, he wouldn't give her the combination, it was better if she forced the door. He had to be able to demonstrate every way possible that he couldn't have anything to do with the robbery, wasn't involved in the book or the money being taken, which were kept there together, in the safe.

Then watching her with that big sloppy grin on his face, patting her hand and fawning over her. Almost as bad as Alphonse. Calling her his little girl, and telling her how she could depend on him, no matter what.

Alex wasn't sure she believed him. She wasn't sure she trusted Cyril a whole bunch. You didn't get to be twenty-seven years old, coming unscathed out of a wartorn country, by putting a whole lot of faith in people.

When she stepped through the office doorway and saw the safe standing there against the

wall, still shut up tight but with a hole drilled in it and filings on the floor, her mind changed gears and went into overdrive.

Could it be, was it at all possible, that it was part of Cyril's plan to set her up, too?

Well?

It was something you would ponder over later, at a bar, when you had a rum and Seven in front of you, and a cigarette going in the ashtray. The present, however, called for action.

She went into the room, opened the bag, and dragged the tools out. Looking at the safe with her head on one side.

They were at the end of the hallway, only three steps from the exit, when they saw the elevator door standing open and glanced in and saw the body lying there, this man sprawled on the floor in a long coat with a sateen lining, not traveling up or down any more, just slouched against the wall going no place with his eyes open wide.

George swallowed.

"Man!" Zeke said.

The open eyes didn't follow you; they wouldn't be following anything any more. They didn't even look like eyes, but more like orbs of dull glass or plastic.

Who was the guy?

One thing George knew, the body hadn't been there an hour ago when he'd left Ma in the alley and walked up the stairs; he had looked into the cage, and it was empty. What had happened since then? Something was going on in the building, that was for sure. The voices, the single shot—and now this. He looked at Zeke, the question hanging unanswered between them.

This was no time for wondering. They pushed through the door and burst out into the alley.

It was really snowing now. Thick flakes sloping down out of a washed out sky. There was the Dodge, still idling, already covered with an inch-thick white blanket. But what gave George a start—Ma was gone. She wasn't where she ought to be, there behind the wheel, waiting for them, ready to roll.

They went down the steps and across the alley, Zeke lagging a little, his smooth-soled boots forcing him into a lumbering sort of shuffle, baby steps to keep from slipping and going down hard on his tail.

George could hear Zeke mumbling, complaining under his breath. "People showing up . . . Dead guys . . . that's not supposed to happen. I mean you study a place to *death* . . ."

"Forget it." George was losing patience. "We got bigger problems. Like where's Ma?"

"It should of been plain sailing," Zeke complained.

George took a look up the intersection, into the snow, and saw Ma. About forty yards away. There was a tire iron in her upraised hand, and as he watched, she brought it down hard on the left front fender of an iced-up sedan that was pulled in tight by a fence. He saw the iron hit and bounce up again before he heard the sound. A dull whack, muted by snow.

She hit the car a second time, the same moment the door of the car popped open and a big guy in a long dark coat got out.

"Ma's in trouble," George said.

Zeke said, "You got to start wondering, what is it, you're jinxed or something . . ."

Ma was circling the strange car now, selecting target areas of sheet metal at random and whacking dents into them. The big man trailed after her, hollering and waving his arms in the air. George began running. He could hear the guy yelling, going, "You crazy! You outa your mind! What're you doing? Put that down!"

He'd dogged Ma completely around the car now, and they were back at the front again

when George arrived. He tried to stop her but Ma swung the bar hard and knocked out a hunk of plastic grille.

George stopped, Zeke not far behind, and the big guy turned to face them. The wind whirled snow around them, snapped the tails of the guy's coat. The guy yelled, "This lunatic belong to you? Look what she done! Just look at it!"

"Bag lady, huh?" Ma said, and knocked a headlight out.

"This broad's crazy," the man said, "see what she's doing? Get her outa here. I mean it. I'll call a cop!"

"Ma," George said reasonably, "what're you doing?"

"Teaching manners," Ma said. "Some people!"

"You touch my car again, that's it!"

Ma knocked a dent in the door.

The guy was ready to pounce, but Ma's tire iron no sooner struck than there was a sudden, louder bang. A noise like two giant hands coming together.

They turned to look. Stared up at the high, flat back of the building, rough yellow brick with snowflakes spiraling into it—a gaping dark hole where two forty inch panes of glass and a wooden window sash had blown out.

George thinking, hey! That was the room we were just in!

Then the big guy said a funny thing.

"Gotcha."

George wondered if he'd heard right. But he saw that Zeke had heard it, too, Zeke's red-veined, bulging eyes gathering the big guy in.

The big guy didn't add anything, but something was to his liking: that upturned curl at the corner of his mouth. This guy who didn't have a whole lot to smile about, his car sitting there with a long row of dents pounded into it.

He seemed to have forgotten the car, forgotten Ma. He started briskly towards the building, a tall man in a dark coat with his hands thrust deep in his pockets, taking long, eager strides in the snow.

Maybe Ma was satisfied with the lesson she'd taught, or maybe the explosion had sobered her up. She let George drag her away by the arm, all three of them following the big guy. When they came up even with the Dodge, George said, "Zeke, let's get Ma into the car."

Zeke ignored him.

They had reached the rear of the building. The Dodge was there, right *there*, with the engine running. All they had to do was get in and drive. Only

Zeke seemed to be under some kind of spell. Looking like he meant to follow the big guy up the steps of the loading dock and go back inside the building and take a ride in the elevator with the dead guy in it.

George gave him a poke. "Zeke, let's go. There's a body in there, remember?"

He knew it was the wrong thing to say the instant the words came out. It made the big guy stop, turn around, and take another look at them. The guy putting together a few ideas, his mind at work behind that grim, ugly look.

"How do you know that?"

George shrugged. Not looking for trouble. Wanting to leave.

The guy said, "I know. You were inside this building a minute ago, weren't you?"

George and Zeke said nothing.

Ma said, "What's it to you? Wanna make something out of it?"

The big guy was leaning toward them, his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched. "What's this about a body? What did you see in there exactly? A body and what else?"

"Nothing," George and Zeke said.

"Everything," Ma said.

The big guy nodded. "I think what we'll do, we'll all go inside and have us a talk. You two—and the bag lady."

"Jeez!" Ma said. "That does it!"

She took the guy by surprise, backing him up the steps of the dock and going right at him. When Ma went on the attack, she'd go for you and she wouldn't hesitate.

"Call me names, huh? Like you're some kinda choice cut yourself, some kinda damn special issue or something!" Ma had both elbows out and was stabbing her finger at him.

"Ma," George said. "Easy, Ma. He's got a gun."

He did, too. An ugly automatic in his white-gloved hand.

"I know what a gun is," Ma said, "I don't need you to explain it to me."

The guy twitched the gun at them. "Shut up, all of you. Shut up and listen." He wasn't sure about Ma. "You gonna listen?"

They waited.

The big guy said, "That's better. Now, let's cut the crap. You were inside this building, you broke in, I know you did. Okay, we'll forget about that. But you saw something. Maybe you *heard* something, too. I want to know what you think happened in there. Tell me."

His hand was nervous on the gun. Fingers opening and closing.

Ma hadn't heard a word he'd said.

"You called me a bag lady," she snarled. "Now, you take it back or they won't know whether to call a proctologist or a shoemaker, I'll give you such a kick."

"She been eating razor blades?" The pistol moved side to side, menacing them. "I said we're gonna have a private talk. Get inside the building, all of you."

"Or else what?" Ma demanded.

George knew one thing. They went in that building, they were probably going to wind up stretched out with the guy on the elevator floor. But if they refused, what then? Would this guy shoot them right here?

Then a voice came out of the snow, calm and conciliatory.

"Maybe put the gun away, Cyril. Talk to me. That'd be a good idea, doan you think?"

A woman stood in the receiver's door, athletic and trim looking, in a drab black jacket. She stepped out, choosing her footing carefully. Her hair stuck out from under a black wool cap in a dark fringe. A very pretty girl. And she too was holding a gun.

Cyril said, "Alex, you okay?" His face lighting up, a look of relief playing there a few sec-

onds. The guy with his gun, the girl with hers, the two seeming to know each other pretty good but not in any rush to put their weapons away. "Alex, I'm so glad you're all right. That explosion." He gave his head a shake. "I'll tell you, I heard that noise, I was scared."

"Scared?" Alex raised her eyebrows. "That is strange. You should have expected it. There is suppose to be a noise," Alex said, "when someone breaks open a safe that is tripwired with C-4." She said, "Good thing someone had already drilled it. I could look in with the light, see the wire. I could run a lead and set it off from outside the room. There was nothing in the safe, Cyril. Nothing. You gonna tell me how come?"

Cyril spread his arms wide. Still holding the gun.

"Listen, kid, it's not what you're thinking. It was *these* people, busted in and planted that charge. Trying to rob me, I guess. And jeez, you could of been killed, walking right into the middle of it."

"We never planted nothing, only drilled," Zeke said.

"They planted explosives," Cyril insisted, like a schoolkid protesting to the teacher.

"Those weasels couldn't plant potatoes," Ma said.

The girl was calm. As if she wouldn't get excited if the ground opened under her feet.

"I think," she said to Cyril, "you wanted to fake a robbery, all right, just like you tole us. Only you din want no one walking around later who could tell anybody who planned it."

Ma said, "Those two couldn't blow up a tubful of gasoline with a hand grenade."

Cyril's voice got louder, the guy really arguing now.

"No. They *were* after the money! They planted something to blow up the safe. Then they must of heard you coming, Alex, and ducked out, and—"

Alex said, "I doan think so."

"You mean you're going to believe *them* over *me*?" Cyril's eyes were wide open.

Alex said, "Cyril, that hole drilled in the door. When I shine a light inside, you know what I see?"

She had everyone's attention.

"I look in, I see the same igniter, the same orange stripe wire you give to me, Cyril, when you ask me to do the job."

There was a silence. And then a bunch of things happened. Cyril tried a smile on her, an empty grin, then brought his gun up fast. Ma, two feet away from him, swung the tire iron up and caught Cyril under the wrist. Cyril

screamed. His gun flew into the snow. Weaponless, he made a grab for the tire iron, and jerked the thing out of Ma's hand. But Ma got a fistful of his coat as he backpedaled away from her, and Ma dragged his coattails up over his head.

His voice suddenly muffled. "Hey! Let go! Hey!" Stooped over. Dancing little steps on the ice.

The wind keened around them, driving crystalline snowflakes up the back of the guy's white shirt. George grabbed hold of Ma.

"Come on. We got to get outa here. There's a dead guy in that place, something's exploded, the cops'll be here, the fire department, I don't know who else. Ma—"

Ma wasn't listening. She slipped sideways out of George's reach and, still holding onto the big guy's coat, made a sudden move with her shoulders and swung the guy dead-weight over the side of the dock and into the dumpster, screaming.

She stood there with smoldering eyes and said, "Bag lady!"

It played out like a scene from an old gangster movie. The white snow and the darkness: a black and white forties crime flick. The

girl walking to the edge of the dock, holding the gun in her hand. Cyril's head on a level with her knees, clumsily finding his feet in the bin half filled with snow-covered garbage. Frozen cardboard jutting from hummocks of ice. Snowy trash glaring in fluorescent light.

A big bin, George thought. You could get rid of anything there.

Cyril said, "I been good to you, Alex. I don't deserve this, okay?"

"I wish," she said, "we could get Alphonse in there with you. Garbage—that's where he belongs, too."

Cyril still trying the charm.

"You think he'd be up to it with your slugs in him?"

"One slug," Alex said.

"Oh, excuse me. One, huh? He's probably only taking a nap then." The big guy looking pathetic, a large worried man in a large black coat. Garbage all around him and a big goofy grin on his face.

The girl brought out a large .44 revolver and put the small automatic away.

"You know," she said, "that bin look like my village after the soldiers went away. Nothing but garbage." She looked at Ma and said, "You better go. Doan you think?"

As they got into the Dodge, they could hear the big guy still arguing with her.

They drove around the block and had to stop at the corner to brush the snow off the windshield because George couldn't see where he was going. He had to dig around under the seat for the snow whisk, Ma nagging him the whole time: "Hurry, you weasel. I been waiting all night, I got to go to the bathroom, and I don't wanna miss my favorite TV show in the world."

"We didn't get the money!"

Zeke said miserably, slamming his fist into the seat.

"Hey!" Ma said. Getting chippy. Like the Dodge was some kind of a classic motor vehicle or something. After what she'd done to the big guy's car? Man.

"I know they kept money in that safe," Zeke said. "I studied it to death."

George said, "No. The guy in the elevator. *He* studied it to death."

George got back into the car.

There was a roar at the end of the lane. The BFI truck emerged from the alley and trundled past them: huge and otherworldly in the lights and the snow, a garbage machine from hell. They watched it stop at the next building, extend its steel arms, and lift a dumpster high in the air, its big top doors dropping open to swallow the garbage up. Then, roaring and

booming, it set the bin back down and lurched away, leaving a rutted trail in the snow.

"What time is it?" Ma said after a moment.

"Ten to," George told her.

"We can still make it home for *EastEnders*."

They watched the lights of the BFI truck vanish in the snow.

Ma said, "I ask him to move;

he goes, you're just a bag lady, that's what you are."

George said, "You think he was still in that bin when the truck got there?"

"I dunno," Zeke said. "Tell you the truth, I don't even wanna think about it."

"Here's something for you to think about," Ma said. "I miss my *EastEnders*, I won't be fit to live with."

Déjà Vu

by Stephanie Kay Bendel

It's maddening, but ever since I've been able to see, my mind's been playing tricks on me. It's a fair exchange, I suppose; one faculty for another. And at my age, one expects the mind to be less clear.

Still, most of my memories are as vivid as the full-faced moon that grins at me from above the convent walls. I remember clearly the last day I was blind.

There had been some confusion in the refectory at lunch. I heard buzzing and whispering as I entered, and it puzzled me. Normally we eat our meals in silence, or one of the sisters reads a meditation.

I recognized Sister Monica's step as she approached me. "Oh, Sister Ann," she whispered. "Isn't it terrible?"

"Isn't what terrible?"

"There's a lunatic in the village. He's beaten an old man and assaulted a farmgirl. No one knows who he is or where he came from."

"And there are two unexplained murders," Sister Agnes' musical voice chimed in as we sat down. "A vagrant and a shopkeeper. They think he killed them."

"The tinker told Sister Polycarp about it this morning," Sister Monica added.

Reverend Mother cleared her throat formidably, and the refectory lapsed into silence. "My daughters," she said in that gentle voice laced with authority, "as of now, no one will leave this building without my permission."

There was no explanation, nor was any expected. Obedience is one of our vows. Besides, we all knew that we had shown a lack of discipline by whispering at the table.

I could feel the atmosphere become subdued. Wooden chairs scraped against the floor, and the gentle murmur of grace was followed by the soft clinking of dishes and utensils.

I remember the smell of watery lentil soup and the taste of slightly stale bread. I remember that very clearly.

*

"Harry, wake up! It's three o'clock!"

Harry rolled over and rubbed his eyes. "Right you are, old gal. Gonna get the coffee on?"

"I'm starting it now," Gert said, climbing out of the other side of the bed and putting on her slippers. "Honestly, Harry, when are you going to look for a job that has civilized hours?"

He kneaded his fingers for a few moments to relieve the arthritic stiffness that came into them while he slept. "Oh, Gerty, how many times have we been through this? I told you, I really like this job."

"What is there to like about having to go to work at this hour?"

"It's not bad once you get used to it. Besides, you have no idea how peaceful the world is before the sun comes up."

"And you have no idea how peaceful it is to sleep until a reasonable hour." She pulled on a faded blue robe and brushed a wisp of gray hair away from her eyes.

"I've told you before, Gert. You don't have to get up with me. I can make my own coffee."

"Then I'd never get to see you. As it is, by the time I get home from work, you're ready to go to bed. This cup of coffee in the wee hours of the morning is the only time we get to talk."

He rubbed the gray stubble on his chin and grinned at her. "After thirty-seven years of marriage, my wife complains that she doesn't see enough of me. I must be doin' something right."

She smiled in spite of herself and for a moment, in the dim light of the bedroom, Harry saw the face of the young girl he'd married.

"All the same," she said, "I really do wish you'd look for something else."

He paused at the bathroom door. "At my age, that isn't easy, you know. I was lucky to get this job when Norden's closed."

Gert nodded sadly and padded off to the kitchen to start the coffee.

Clare was late to lunch that day, I remember. She was one of the novices, and it was her duty to take food to the sisters in the infirmary. She came to the table just as we were finishing. I smiled at the sound of her light step. She was no more than a child, really—perhaps twelve or thirteen—and she often had to restrain herself from skipping down the convent halls.

Since the day she'd arrived the previous fall, there had been a special place in my heart for Clare. Perhaps it was because she reminded me of myself. I was about her age when I first came to



THEN SHE WHISPERED, "HOW OLD IS THIS PLACE, ANYHOW?"

St. Cecelia's. It was more than sixty years ago, and I remember *that* clearly, too.

The lilacs were in bloom, even as they are now. The sun was hot, and my father and I were tired and dusty. We'd traveled two full days to come to St. Cecelia's, and the coolness of the convent was a relief. We sat in the parlor with Sister Helen—who was the Reverend Mother then—and discussed my future.

My father's voice was desperate. "Oh, please, sister, if you don't take Jeanne, what will become of her? She is motherless, blind since birth, and I can't care for her any longer."

"Surely there is a relative—an aunt, perhaps?" The Reverend Mother had a gentle, purring voice. I remember the smell of clean linen about her.

"No, no aunts. Only one sister, Mary, and her husband's a heartless man who won't be bothered with a blind girl."

There was a long silence. I could hear my father's labored breathing. Never strong, he was especially fatigued today after our long journey. At last Reverend Mother replied, "Very well. She will have to earn her keep, however. We are a poor order."

I heard relief and joy in my father's voice. "Oh, Jeanne will be a help to you. Her sister taught her many household tasks. She can clean and fetch and carry—"

I felt his hot tears on my cheek as he kissed me goodbye, and I think I knew even then that he had not much time left on this earth. I remember that afternoon *so* clearly. And it is a definite memory, one I can place in my mind and know exactly when I experienced it.

It's not like the feeling I have now, of having stood before in exactly this spot on the balcony overlooking the gardens and seeing the moon rise just above the sycamore. Of seeing the long silver thread in the valley that is the river flowing to the sea. Any time now, he will come as he always does.

There's my mind, playing tricks on me again! I know I cannot have experienced this before because I have not had my sight for long, and how many nights could there be exactly like this one?

It's probably just age. When one has lived as long as I have, one must be philosophical about such things. And, of course, when one has had a severe blow to the head, well, almost anything can happen.

*

Gert poured Harry's coffee and mixed a cup of decaf for herself. She wanted to be able to get back to sleep.

"I tell you, darlin', if you'd only come with me once on my run, you'd understand why I like being a milkman." Harry reached for the sugar bowl and measured out a level spoonful before stirring it into his coffee. "It's—well, it's like magic out there in the moonlight."

Gert pulled her robe more closely about her. "All shadows and chills. And probably robbers and thieves around. What's magic about that?"

He chuckled. "It's not that cold—and you can wear a jacket. And you'll be perfectly safe. What do you say? Come with me today?"

"I have to go to work."

"I'll drop you off when it's time."

She hesitated. "I'll be exhausted by the end of the day."

"Just this once. Please! Then you'll understand why I like my job." He glanced at his watch. "I have to leave in ten minutes. How about it, old gal?"

Gert hesitated. When Harry's eyes twinkled like that, there was something irresistible about him. "I'm probably crazy," she grumbled. "And I'll be tired and crabby tonight."

"Then you'll do it?"

She smiled.

This feeling of having experienced things before reminds me of an incident that happened when I was a young child. My sister Mary was trying to explain to me what a mirror was. I found it difficult to comprehend a reflection of myself—it seemed somehow frightening. And then she told me that if she stood between two mirrors, she could see an infinite number of Marys. Reflections of reflections of reflections. And then I knew why I had been frightened.

It was a silly thought, really. I wondered, even if I were able to see, how I could be sure which was real, the image or me? And of course, an infinite number of Jeannes—why, it was like being drowned.

And that's how I feel right now, standing here, sensing that I've seen this night before, not once but many times. And not being able to place the memory in the right spot in my brain.

Ah, well! It's a small enough price to pay for a life that has been not only long but satisfying. At first I was assigned to menial tasks

in the kitchen and the laundry. Soon I had learned my way around the whole convent. Though it is an extremely large building, it was not hard to become thoroughly familiar with it, for nothing ever changed. The order and discipline of a nunnery are exactly suited to a blind person. No good sister ever left a chair out of place at the table, or a broom in the hall.

I discovered this balcony in those early days, and it became one of my favorite places. Whenever I had free time, I came here to let the sun and the breeze kiss my face. I enjoyed the smells of the seasons, from the smoky air of fireplaces in winter to the moldy odor of wet leaves in the fall. Best of all, though, was the scent of lilacs in spring.

I learned to tell the sisters apart, not only by their voices, but by their footsteps. Sister Titus had a heavy, plodding gait. Sister Bridget was always in a hurry and often was reprimanded for walking without decorum. Sister Benedict had a slight limp. All of them were kind to me, particularly in those first lonely weeks away from home.

Letters arrived from my father from time to time, and one of the younger sisters was assigned to read them to me. They were a great comfort. At night I dreamed of the day he would come and take me back home. Then one day, less than a year after I had arrived at St. Cecelia's, a letter from Mary came, telling me that Father had died, and I knew I would never leave the convent again.

As much as my handicap allowed, I was educated along with the novices. They took turns reading to me, correcting my grammar, and helping me to memorize scripture.

When I was twenty, Reverend Mother asked me to consider joining the order. I had no hesitation. St. Cecelia's was my home, and I had learned to live by the rules of the convent. Now I would truly belong.

And so I became Sister Ann.

The year passed in prayer and fasting. Except for the great church holidays—Christmas and Easter and Pentecost—one day was very like another. It's strange, now that I think of it. There is nothing that I do here that I haven't done a thousand times before, and in almost exactly the same way. And yet I don't ever remember being confused by what was memory and what was not. All that repetition and never the sense of *déjà vu*.

Not like now.

*

"I must be crazy," Gert muttered as the two of them left the house. "A two mile walk at a quarter to four in the morning!"

Harry grinned. "It's a lot faster if we cut through the grounds of the old convent."

"That spooky old place?" Gert sounded reluctant.

"I do it all the time," he said. "Who's going to care?"

"I don't know. I've heard strange stories."

He laughed. "Gerty! I wouldn't take you any place that wasn't safe. Besides, it's beautiful there. All the lilacs are in bloom now, and the smell of them—well, it's like heaven. There's nothing to be afraid of. Come see."

She gazed upward. "It is a lovely night. Look at those stars! I've never seen so many."

He put his arm around her shoulder. "Didn't I tell you?"

My sight came to me in a most unusual way. It happened late in the afternoon of the day we'd heard about the lunatic. It was just before Vespers. I was in my cell resting when I heard footsteps passing outside my window. They were Clare's.

Idly, I wondered what duty of hers was so important that Reverend Mother had granted her permission to leave the building.

Then I remembered that Clare had been late to lunch. She hadn't heard about the lunatic, nor did she know that she shouldn't be outside.

I hurried to the door. "Clare!"

No answer.

I paused on the step. I wasn't certain which way Clare had been going. I started down the path toward the gardens, calling out and stopping at short intervals to listen. But I heard nothing.

I reached the edge of the woods and decided to turn back. Clare wouldn't have gone into the woods. It would be better to return to the convent and sound an alarm. Or at least tell Reverend Mother what had happened.

Then I heard the crackling of twigs and the rustle of leaves. Stealthy, unfamiliar footsteps behind me. Little grunting, animal noises.

I turned. "Who—"

The first blow knocked me to the ground. I don't remember anything else.

And later, when I opened my eyes, I could see.

*

"It is beautiful here," Gert admitted. "Do you always come across the convent grounds on your way to work?"

"Mostly. Not when there's heavy snow, of course. Listen to the silence, old gal!"

She paused to drink in the quiet of the night. Then she whispered, "How old is this place, anyhow?"

"Almost three hundred years, I think. There's a lot of history here."

"Maybe we shouldn't be on the grounds," she said doubtfully.

"Who's going to chase us away? No one's here any more."

Gert turned to look at him. "Do you believe those stories?"

Harry's eyes twinkled. "You know me, darlin'. I might believe just about anything's possible."

"Aren't you scared?"

He shook his head. "That I'm not. There's many a thing we can't explain, but that doesn't make 'em anything to be frightened of."

"Harry, have you ever seen anything strange around here?" Gert's voice was tense.

He tightened the arm he had around her shoulders. "I've seen plenty of things in my day, old gal. And if you watch real close, you might just see them, too."

"Now what's *that* supposed to mean?"

He chuckled.

When I realized I could see, I felt such joy and amazement at my newfound sense that I actually do not remember whether I felt any pain. A fresh world was open to me. All I wanted to do was *see*. I could stand for hours, just looking, seeing the lovely lilacs whose scent I have enjoyed for years. Seeing the trees pointing their fingers skyward, and the strong rock walls of St. Cecelia's. It was so wonderful. It *is* so wonderful. Sometimes I feel that God in his goodness has granted me heaven here on earth.

How different the world is from the way I had imagined it. Strangely, it seems less substantial than I thought it would be. But perhaps that is because I am learning to rely on a sense I never had before.

Now as I look down at the gardens, I see him—no—how strange! Tonight there are *two* people—standing at the edge of the lawn, their figures gray in the moonlight. The other—a woman, I think—begins to run away, like a startled deer. The man pulls her back. He waves to me as he always does. I wave back.

I think it paradoxical that so many people find us sisters unapproachable. We are the gentlest, most peaceable creatures on earth. Yet, because our ways and dress are different, people are uneasy around us.

But perhaps I'm not being fair. Maybe the woman wasn't sure they were allowed to be on the convent grounds. Years ago, outsiders weren't permitted here without good reason. We seldom saw anyone from the village except for the peddlers and tradesmen who came to the kitchen door to bargain with Sister Polycarp.

Times have changed, however, and now I often see strangers on the grounds, particularly at night when I am here on the balcony. Perhaps they come here for the same reason I do. The night is so beautiful, I could stay here forever.

"Harry! There's someone up there, on the balcony!"

"Not to worry. It's just old Sister Ann."

"The *ghost*? The ghost of the nun who was murdered a hundred years ago?"

"Aye, that's the one. She was blind, poor thing. Bludgeoned to death by a madman, she was."

"Let's get out of here." Gert darted toward the bushes.

"Whoa, old gal!" He grabbed the sleeve of her jacket and pulled her back. "There's nothing to fear. The old nun won't hurt you. She's just out enjoying the beauty of the night, same as us. Watch."

He waved.

"She's waving back. She sees us."

"Yep. Ain't it a wonder?"

It's a miracle! The stars, the faint trail of cloud in front of the moon, the mists above the river, the full-blooming lilacs on the lawn below—the beauty of the world leaves me breathless. But I question whether anyone who hasn't been blind for a lifetime can truly see it.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



William Shatner is best known for his role as Captain James T. Kirk on *Star Trek*. He's also the author of a space detective series; the latest is **Teklab** (Ace; \$5.50). To enjoy these books, as I do, you should be able to accept the cross-genre conventions of a twenty-first century private eye tale, and then go with the flow. In this third case, investigator Jake Cardigan and his wisecracking partner Gomez are on the trail of a deadly assassin dubbed "The Unknown Soldier." At the same time, his ex-wife is pleading with him to track down their missing teenage son. The boy has followed his runaway girlfriend, the innocent daughter of a Tek drug lord. Jake fears that her journey will confirm her worst nightmares about good old dad. As it turns out, the two trails dangerously lead to the same destination. If you're craving a fast read, try this.

Lovers of the tried and true English mystery must read Susanah Stacey. *Goodbye, Nanny Gray*, *A Knife at the Opera*, *Grave Responsibility*, and *Body of Opinion* have all featured the estimable Inspector Bone, his teenage daughter Charlotte, and the lovely scenery and village locals of countryside Kent. Her latest, **The Late Lady** (Pocket, \$20) is especially absorbing. It is centered around the village home of a successful novelist and TV scriptwriter, Jake Marsh, and his fascinating family and entourage: his second wife Fenny, a talented craftswoman in her own right; Jake's fragile, elegant mother; Anna, his rebellious teenage daughter from his first marriage; her newfound friend (a boy whom Charlotte has been seeing); the glamorous star of the writer's TV series; and Marsh's former in-laws, in the picture because of young

Anna. Stacey invites us into their lives and lulls the reader into the pattern of their comfortable upper-middle-class British routines. When the skeleton of Marsh's first wife is discovered on the property—proof that the first Mrs. Marsh didn't simply abandon her family, but instead was murdered twenty years earlier—the reader is shocked into a closer examination of this household. Like her compatriot, P. D. James, Stacey explores the psychology of her characters against an impeccably drawn backdrop of British village life. The result is an exceptionally good British mystery.

It is author Celestine Sibley's skill at her craft that makes **Ah, Sweet Mystery** sing in a reader's memory long after the book has been closed (Harper, \$4.50). Its protagonist is Kate Mulcay, widow and longtime Atlanta newspaperwoman, who lives in her beloved log cabin in what is usually a quiet, peaceful country spot north of the city. But times they are a-changing. Developers are threatening to turn the area into yet another suburb, and violence seems to have arrived with the bulldozers when a man is found slain. Kate's world truly turns topsy-turvy when her octogenarian neighbor, Miss Willie, confesses to the crime. Certain that Miss Willie is innocent, Kate uses her journalist's contacts, the cooperation of a female cop from Atlanta's elite Red Dog corps, and the insights of Miss Marlowa, one of the area's few surviving Southern belles, to find the truth. Like her protagonist, Sibley has been writing for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* for more than forty years. Her love of Georgia, its history and its progress, its landscape and its people, her eye for detail, and her ear for the dialogue of the South breathe life into every page of this novel.

Linda Barnes introduced her redheaded Beantown sleuth, Carlotta Carlyle, in a short story several years ago. Since then, the taxi-driving private investigator has starred in four novels. The latest is **Snapshot** (Delacorte, \$19.95), and like its predecessors, it's solid entertainment. The story opens with anonymous photos of a child growing up, from babyhood to little girl. Someone is mailing them to Carlotta every week, like clockwork. When the client finally appears, Carlotta is hesitant to accept the case. Emily Woodrow is obviously a griefstricken mother who has watched her little girl go through cancer treatments, and who has suddenly—when hope seemed brightest—lost her child. The woman has been seeing a therapist who lives on Carlotta's block; it was he who suggested to the bereaved mother that she hire a private eye to confirm what everyone is telling her: her little girl did not die due to some horrible mistake committed by the children's pri-

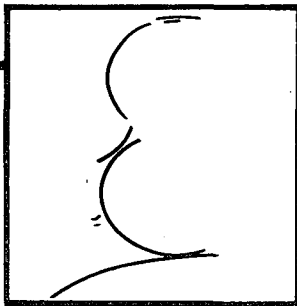
vate hospital where she was a patient . . . or did she? Barnes manages to build a painful premise into compelling suspense, and Carlotto's bright narrative balances the drama. If you haven't read Linda Barnes, you're missing out on one of the best private eye series being published.

A new face on the amateur sleuthing scene is Kit Deleeuw, introduced in Jon Katz's **Death by Station Wagon** (Doubleday Perfect Crime, \$17). His is a face readers will welcome back. Kit shares the stage with his back-to-work wife and kids, a sagacious oldtimer, a Cuban refugee who runs a mall deli—and the historic town of Rochambeau, New Jersey. One might say, in fact, that Rochambeau, “a town with musty old family-run businesses and sprawling clapboard houses long before it became an upper-middle-class suburb where three out of four backyards are equipped with organic wooden climbing gyms,” is the main character. Kit was once a highly-paid, high-powered force on Wall Street, but refusing to help the FBI make its case against some of his corrupt colleagues got him banned from trading. His wife gleefully goes back to work to be the breadwinner, and Kit happily hangs out a P.I. shingle and learns how to be a housefather. An apparent teenage suicide-murder already has the town buzzing by the time the dead boy's friends hire Kit to clear their friend's name. This is Kit's biggest case so far, and one that will reveal another side of his quiet little town before he learns the truth.

Paper Doll (Putnam, \$19.95) is Robert B. Parker's latest Spenser novel, a twisty tale of old grudges and assumed identities and the insidious dangers inherent in presenting a perfect picture to the world at large. Loudon Tripp has old money and two privileged children, a mansion and his own business, club memberships and the friendship of powerful politicians. None of that protected him from the devastation he feels at the death of Olivia, his perfect wife, who was brutally slain. The police are calling it a random act of violence. Tripp wants vengeance. From the beginning of the investigation, however, Spenser can't quite make the idyllic picture Tripp has given him fit with the facts. The Tripp children seem haunted. Olivia herself remains almost a cipher. When Spenser travels to small-town Georgia and the mansion where Olivia was raised, where her estranged father still lives, he becomes the target for someone who doesn't want the picture of Olivia Tripp to ever come into sharper focus. *Paper Doll*, as always, means spending quality time with Spenser. This novel, too, is stronger than many of Parker's most recent books.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



When watching the newest Hollywood version of *The Vanishing* only two years after the original Dutch film was released, keep in mind that even Hitchcock changed things when he remade his 1934 thriller *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

His updated story, starring Jimmy Stewart and Doris Day, was not only forty-five minutes longer but saw Day use her excellent singing voice to win the freedom of her abducted son in the film's climax.

In the original, the female lead (Edna Best) is an expert markswoman who uses her skill in the end to rescue her abducted daughter. Maybe Hitchcock thought mainstream American audiences in 1956 wouldn't accept a woman killing someone, even to protect

her child. Maybe he just wanted to show off Day's voice to maximum effect.

Whatever the differences, both films were critically acclaimed when they were released and both stand up, even today.

The first *Vanishing*, directed by Dutch film maker George Sluizer, was the story of a man's obsession with the inexplicable disappearance of his girlfriend while the two vacationed. So is the second *Vanishing*, also directed by Sluizer.

The major difference, and for a psychological thriller it's about as major as you can get, is in the two endings.

Without giving away the conclusion, it can be said that the Dutch film ends on a very dark note. The American version finishes with, let's just say, a Hollywood ending.

The more recent Sluizer release stars Keifer Sutherland as Jeff Harriman, the man who is unable to continue a normal life after his girlfriend Diane disappears at a rest stop. Three years after the fact, he continues to plaster posters all over in an attempt to find out what happened to her. He's even writing a book on the experience.

On what became their final day together, the pair had been arguing because they ran out of gas in the middle of a long tunnel and were nearly hit by a truck and because Sutherland walked off alone to get gas, without waiting for his girl to dig out a flashlight.

Before the disappearance, they had made up, and Sutherland swore he would never leave her alone again.

While we're getting this background information on the eventual victims, we also see a superficially normal but truly psychotic professor planning his crime—the snatching of a woman off the street in order to secrete her at his cabin in the woods and do who-knows-what with her. This villain, an evil man with the improbable name of Barney, is played by Jeff Bridges. And Hannibal Lecter's got nothing on him.

Hollywood also adds another dimension which the first ver-

sion did very well without—a new girlfriend who sticks around for the duration.

Things really turn creepy when Bridges sees Sutherland on television pleading for information about his lost friend.

So Bridges pays him a visit and dispassionately offers to let him know what happened to Diane. The catch? Sutherland must go with him and experience just what Diane did in order to discover her fate.

Bridges' character is quite scary, in an understated sort of way. His stiff gait and vaguely French Canadian or European accent give him a spooky quality that sent shivers down my spine.

Sutherland, at times frenetic, is not bad as the tormented victim. His devoted new girlfriend is, if not inspiring, certainly an appealing actress who makes the most of a less than believable role. After all, what woman in her right mind would stick with this guy?

Finally, while many filmgoers may hoot and howl at the Hollywood treatment of *The Vanishing*, like *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, both versions are memorable thrillers. But maybe Sluizer should have waited a couple of decades for his remake. Because that's what Hitchcock did.

THE STORY THAT WON



The January Mysterious by Barbara Fay Mitchell of Honorable mentions go to Eibarska; J. A. Shenk of Aber-McCaslin of Beaverton, Ore-California; Robert V. Kesling nee C. Peters of Belvidere, Illinois; R. Lee Wilson of San Francisco, California; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Randall J. Covill of Atkinson, New Hampshire; and Terry E. Lutwen of Canyon Lake, California.

Photograph contest was won Binghamton, New York. leen Rystrom of York, Ne-deen, Maryland; Carlton gon; Linda Mello of Fremont, of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Re-née C. Peters of Belvidere, Illinois; R. Lee Wilson of San Francisco, California; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Randall J. Covill of Atkinson, New Hampshire; and Terry E. Lutwen of Canyon Lake, California.

Photo by J. K. Potter

SEARCH by Barbara Fay Mitchell

Everyone told her not to do it. "Leave them alone," they'd said. She hadn't listened but had sneaked away.

Starting out at a run, her closed umbrella swinging beside her flying legs, she soon tired. Her eyes probed the roadway and scanned the treelined areas. The only thing that kept her going was the thought, I've got to find them!

She blamed everything on Suzette. The prissy missy who'd come into the yard holding a beautiful doll. Anyone would be drawn to it. Anyone could forget to close the gate behind her.

She'd snatched the doll from Suzette (who'd run to tattle) and stuffed it in the rolled-up umbrella she loved to carry.

Then she discovered her own loss! Then the argument with her parents, followed by her beginning this hunt.

Hoofbeats sounded behind her. The horse caught up and stopped beside her. Its rider slid from the saddle, his strong hands gripped her shoulders.

"So, little one, you got away from us." The voice quivered between anger and relief.

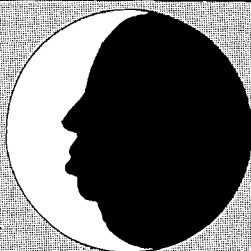
"I just had to find them, Daddy," she cried.

"Back you go, Bo," he said, swinging her onto the horse before mounting it himself.

"But my—" she began.

"Are home, all came back waving their tails behind them." He turned the horse.

Clutching the horse's silky mane, she smiled. She had Suzette's doll, and her sheep had found their way back to the Peep ranch.



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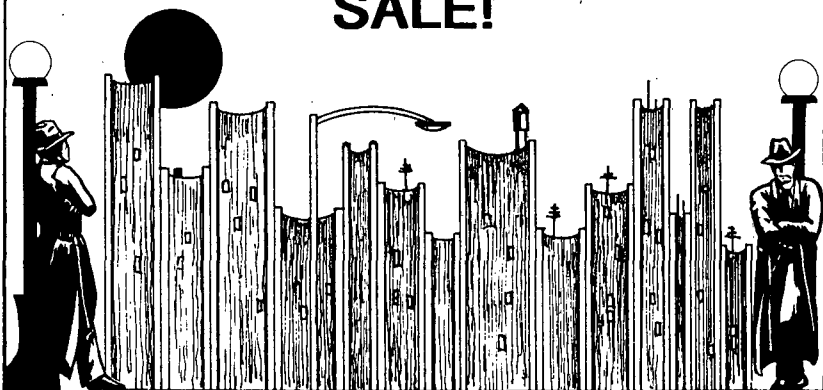
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plus shipping and handling (total cash price of \$38.84) in 4 monthly installments of \$9.71 each. Sales or use
tax will be added where applicable. I understand that I may return the Sleep Shirt at my expense if I am not
completely satisfied at the end of my 30 day Free Trial. The Free Gifts are mine to keep. This order is subject
to approval of my credit by Fingerhut. Offer good in USA only, including APO/FPO.

Please Sign _____

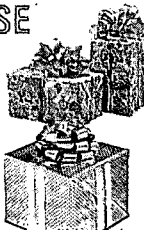
**Get 2 SURPRISE
FREE GIFTS**

just for trying
the Sleep Shirt!

Plus...

**A
BONUS 3RD
FREE GIFT**

if you order within 15 days!



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